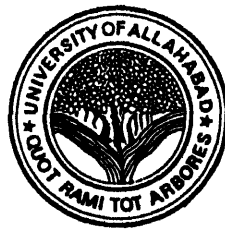


# India In The Work Of RAJA RAO

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by

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# Preface

In the work of Raja Rao, "India is a state of being", an attitude of mind, beyond geographical boundaries. In his search for a subtler Indian identity he makes his characters grope through the worlds of Advaita, Bhakti, Marx and Gandhi, and in the process engages in an exploration of the meaning of human suffering, and of man's relationship with the phenomenal world.

In the process of exploring its own identity a culture evolves its own language. An alien language does not have adequate words and other resources to express the states of mind possible within a culture. Rao, in choosing to explore the Indian identity through a language alien to its culture, finds himself challenged by the problem of communication that had to be handled at the level of evolving a new style.

This thesis grew out of a desire to understand Rao's quest : for an India of the mind, and for a style that would adequately express it in an alien language.

I cannot sufficiently thank Dr. Neelum Saran Gour without whose insightful guidance and meticulous and exacting supervision my explorations in the world of Raja Rao would not have been possible. I shall always cherish the memory of the many hours of discussion we had together during the last three years.

I also wish to mention here Professor Manas Mukul Das, the teacher who guided my first steps into higher academics and who has throughout been a source of inspiration.

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My parents bestowed on me their love and care. They would feel offended if I were to thank them. My daughters have most patiently borne with the eccentricities of a mother busy writing a thesis whose point they are too young to understand.

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**(SHIKHA CHATTERJEE)**



## CHAPTER I

# Introduction

This work sets out to discover India in the work of Raja Rao who has been one of the foremost Indian writers in English. It was these writers, born in the first quarter of this century, who were deeply involved in the question of national identity and made a creative effort to express it in an alien medium viz. English.

The process of European colonisation, besides causing political upheavals, also led to a maze of problems relating to intellectual and creative activity, thus producing a permanent conflict between the East and the West. This affected the Hindu psyche as well, the outcome of which was that a writer like Raja Rao, considered to be the most “Indian” of all Indian novelists in English, has tried to establish a unique Indian identity in an alien language.

An East-West confrontation in India, resulting from colonial subjugation chiefly by the British and native resistance by the Indians, produced the first generation of Indian writers in English. The myth of an East-West encounter was created by the oppressors from Europe and the oppressed from Asia. Raja Rao belongs to this first generation of Indian writers in English who are the product of this encounter between the East and West. For the Indian writer of this period, a vibrant mother tongue would have been a very appropriate medium of communicating and expressing all his emotional, spiritual and intellectual experiences. But historically one finds a nexus between political power and the language of the conqueror so that an attraction towards the language of power is felt. eg. Persian in mediaeval times. Also, English proved to be a common vehicle of intra-ethnic dialogue. So we find that some Indians began writing in English.

There appears to be also the factor of geographical displacement which was responsible for the emergent middle class of English-educated people seeking jobs in either the British government or the British-controlled mercantile houses. Even those in the medical, legal or teaching professions often migrated to areas offering better prospects of livelihood. This built up a considerable class of internal exiles who by virtue of their geographical displacement were both linguistically and culturally alienated. This displaced Indian passed through a period of cultural transition from the medieval to the modern while his intellectual discipline and literary sensibilities received the impact of the West which had modernised after already passing this stage of transition. Hence the Indian writer in English is essentially such a person who is acutely displaced in time as well.

The alienation in space and time leads to a groping for identity that becomes pronounced in Indians growing up during the period of the nationalist struggle for independence. Influenced by various aspects of European romanticism, noted Indian scholars took great pride in the ancient heritage. In this context appears Raja Rao as a major Indian writer trying to face the complex problems of space and time displacement with remarkable artistic sensitivity and literary sophistication.

Raja Rao, born in 1909, was the eldest son of an ancient Brahmin family in the princely state of Mysore which is situated in that part of the peninsula considered far more orthodox Hindu than the Gangetic valley in the North. At the time of Rao's birth, his mother-tongue, Kannada, was passing through an acute crisis threatening its survival as the British, for political gains, had manipulated feudal dissensions and subjected the land of the Kannadigas to the onslaught of other languages. Raja Rao grew up in Hyderabad where two languages viz. Telegu and Urdu are used. He later joined the Aligarh Muslim University for his higher education. He was greatly impressed by British teachers. It is here that he met a great poet, painter and professor in the person of Eric Dickinson about whom he says :

"He impressed me very much. I have been made by him. My literary sensibilities were formed by him."

Dickinson brought out the artist in Rao, teaching him to

"love France"

and

"to appreciate Michaelangelo and Santayana."

After his graduation he left India to study at Montpellier, France, in 1929, where he married Camille Mouly, a highly educated French woman. Besides playing a crucial role in her husband's development as an artist, she served as the model for Madeleine, heroine of Rao's major work, *The Serpent and the Rope*, which came out in 1960. Here we have a truly profound and sensitive portrayal of a white woman by an Indian writer. It was under her influence that Rao explored the potential of his native language and turned out a few writings in Kannada which were not well received. In 1931 came his first novel in English, *Kanthapura*, which became a landmark in Indian writing in English for its poetic realism and elaborate experiment in style.

Being a Brahmin, Rao's marriage with a foreigner was in reality an act of defiance and revolt against the Hindu orthodoxy. The trauma of falling apart was too much and caused an acute restlessness in Rao. Simultaneously came the political turmoil of contemporary India which was too overwhelming to be completely ignored. So in 1941 one finds him with Gandhiji at Sevagram, and during the Quit India Movement in 1942 with socialists as close associates. Later in 1947 at Trivandrum he met Atmananda Guru whom he accepted as his spiritual preceptor.

## **Influences :**

For more than a decade after the dissolution of his marriage, Rao devoted himself to an extensive study of philosophy. He thereafter came up with his novel,

***Comrade Kirillov***, in French. It dealt with the ambiguous soul of an orthodox Brahmin Communist, but evoked lukewarm response. This novel was later published in English in 1976. Rao's major work, ***The Serpent and the Rope***, was produced in 1960, receiving wide acclaim and the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. In 1965 after his second marriage, he published a short novel of unique artistic achievement, ***The Cat and Shakespeare, A Tale of Modern India***. This work attracted sharp reactions from critics and readers. In 1978 Rao came up with a collection of short stories, ***The Policeman and the Rose*** which also incorporates some of the stories of a previous work, ***The Cow of the Barricades*** and a few new ones. Rao's second marriage broke up leading to a third one whereafter came his magnum opus, ***The Chessmaster and His Moves*** in 1988, meant to be the first part of a trilogy. Greeted by the prestigious Neustadt prize by the Oklahoma University, it repeats the theme of multicultural confrontation. Then, in 1989, Rao gives us a collection of short stories entitled ***On the Ganga Ghat*** which presents a glimpse of the reality of India.

Rao considers man to be a "metaphysical entity". His repeated use of "Indian" gestures in trying to assert the superiority of 'India' in metaphysical terms seeks to reject the West though Rao himself admits the fact that he is anchored in an alien ethos. In an article entitled, "The books which have influenced me", he mentions the Indian works and writers as being : The ***Ramayana***, The ***Mahabharata***, ***Brihatstotrarnakara*** (an anthology of Sanskrit religious verse), Buddhist texts translated in English, medieval Kannada mystical poetry, autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, the celebrated art historian and scholar who wrote in English. Among the Western authors/works he mentions the ***Bible***, Plato, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Malraux, Kafka, Valéry, Rilke, André Gide, Ignazio Silone and Gorky. This brief summary indicates that both Indian and European literary works have supplied the model for Rao's fiction. His artistic ambience and uniqueness find adequate expression in the inherited Indian tradition though, one cannot deny the fact that Rao is indebted to

the Western literary tradition. For him it has been a life-long struggle and effort to grapple with an alien tongue, and this binds him almost inextricably to an alien ethos. But there is one single factor determining his colossal effort—the impact of France. This has made him the most sophisticated Indian writer of his generation. One finds a reference to this in the preface to *The Policeman and the Rose* where Rao himself presents his situation thus :

"A South Indian Brahmin, nineteen, spoon-fed on English, with just enough Sanskrit to know.....I knew so little, with an indiscreet education in Kannada, the French literary scene overpowered me."

As France in those days happened to be the centre of all modern European movements in art and literature, we find Rao's heroes referring to persons like Simone Weil or Poincaré, or books such as *Le Silence de la mer* or using notations of Western music. These are not resorted to by other Indian writers in English. Rao arrived at a France where Maurice Barrés and Charles Peguy still held the sway and the residue of *la belle époque*— as suggested in Uncle Charles' youth in *The Serpent and the Rope*— was still felt. Living in France, Rao's nationalism, while adoring a few selected principles of Indian ethos, developed into a metaphysic of India. At that time France was affected by various turbulent crosscurrents of which a particular wave, Catholic humanism, seemed to influence Rao's nationalistic feelings. Charles Peguy is regarded as the person embodying the ideas and ideals of French Catholic humanism. It could be his fervent Catholic faith and Gallicism that helped Rao to merge Hindu nationalism with Advaita Vedanta. Thus Indianness and Hindu orthodoxy have blended in Rao so that in the article, "Meaning of India", the Brahminhood he speaks of is a metaphysical quality of spiritual development unrelated to the Varnashram division. In his earlier works he is a constant critic of the caste hierarchy in its socially oppressive aspect. He interprets Indian history through a particular metaphysical system. It is this typical brand of Indianness which moulds his art as a novelist.

Going through the works of Rao one feels compelled to compare him with the great Russian, Dostoevsky, who had a tremendous power to transform ideas into living human beings. In Rao's novels we find ideas and ideals embodied in flesh and blood—Indian nationalism in Moorthy, humanism in Madeleine, Indophilia in Ramaswamy, Catholicism in Georges and so on. Though Rao's Brahmin heroes lead a non-violent and sedate existence far removed from the dim and murky atmosphere of the Russian author's violent underworld, one finds his ideas confronting the external world through the life and experience of the individual constituting the basis of all Rao's novels. Hence, Rao emphasizes the soul of man and not his existence as a social being. He seems to uphold Rainer Maria Rilke's assertion in the Seventh Elegy where he says,

"Nowhere beloved can world exist but within.

Rao thus depicts a reality that is multilayered and his fictional characters, though engaged in mundane activities, are continuously elevated to a different plane altogether. For this kind of character presentation Rao may be said to be indebted to Dostoevsky who, bringing metaphysical treatment into a story of crime and punishment, could transform it and make it a quest for spiritual dealings. Rao had been profoundly impressed by Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karmazov*. The source for his novel *Comrade Kirillov* is Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed*. In fact, French novelists from Malraux onwards have been following Dostoevsky, and Rao seems to be in line with these French novelists.

It is important to note that Rao is an artist influenced equally by the East and the West. We often find him working under a dual influence. For e.g., while claiming to revere the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, he actually uses the *Uttararamacharitam* which is a deviation from Valmiki whenever his hero is in a critical situation. Again, while extolling medieval Kannada poetry, he upholds that rigid Brahminic orthodoxy against which the Kannada saint poets protested throughout their lives.

When Ramaswamy, the hero of *The Serpent and the Rope*, asserts his "Indianness" through the love of Savithri, Rao quotes a line from Dante, the great Catholic poet,

"From the most holy waters I came forth again remade..."

Yet the reader is well aware of the fact that Dante's Catholic faith seems very objectionable to Ramaswamy and he calls it "the inversion of truth". His characters follow a private code of conduct like that preached by André Gide which states that life must be free from all commitments except to oneself. Hence discovering one's true self is the goal of all Rao's heroes.

Having deep roots in the Western literary tradition and following the Western intellectual and artistic tradition, Rao declares :

"An Indian writer in English must absolutely discover and identify himself as an Indian first."

He therefore considers literature to be a *sadhana* and not a profession, thereby making it superior to the Western writer's life "as an intellectual adventure".

[According to Rao, the three constituents of a book are "the word, the author, the reader". In the centre lies the word, rather the sound which is the Absolute (*sabda Brahman*). The purpose of the writer is to reach that stage when

"the eternality of the sound (*sabda*) will manifest itself."

Rao does not think that it is the duty of the writer to communicate. Rather, it is the critic who should

"have the experience of the impersonal and the Absolute"

to be able to conform to the exalted standard of the writer. So, according to Rao, the critic must be a connoisseur with such metaphysical attributes. Words are meaningless to Rao since at the level of the realisation of the word as Absolute the distinction between the reader and the writer ceases to exist. Rao is occupied in the quest for the words as an abstract.]<sup>1</sup> Many of his "impersonal utterances" form

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1. As explained by Raja Rao, *The Writer and the Word* in *The Meaning of India*.

a chronicle of his ***“personal*** philosophical quest”. He confesses certain aspects of his life being emphasized in each book and says,

“they are a fairly accurate statement of my life.”

One finds Rao transforming his entire subjective experience into an art form. His autobiography becomes the source of his literary output. His works present an encounter between the East and the West as well as between an archaic-medieval and modern existence. He writes at a time when traditional values do not correspond to the actual experience of life and thus lead the individual to turn inwards in the quest for reality. And it is this quest indeed which becomes the focal point of the life and work of Raja Rao and makes him a difficult writer.

\* \* \* \* \*



## CHAPTER 2

# The Preface to “Kanthapura”

Raja Rao's *Preface* or *Foreword* to the novel *Kanthapura* is an important critical document and a manifesto of his artistic creed. It throws valuable light on his views regarding style and Indianness, the use of English by Indians and the art of story-telling. This preface may be called a minor classic in itself.

Style is Rao's primary concern and he feels that the style must be characteristically Indian capturing the tempo of Indian life. Indians think quickly, talk quickly and walk quickly and this quickness must be infused into the style of an Indian novelist writing in English. He must capture the very flavour of Indian life. Raja Rao has tried to capture this Indian flavour in *Kanthapura* by using characteristic Indian imagery — imagery built up by the sights and sounds of Indian life. Therefore, in the novel we find the frequent use of idioms and phrases which are characteristically Indian. The style adopted is chatty and colloquial because in typical Indian tradition the story has been told by an old and garrulous narrator.

Raja Rao knows every Indian village is enriched by its local myths and legends which he alludes to as *Sthala-Purana*. In the Foreword Rao tells us,

“There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village—Rama might have rested under this pipal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut by the village gate. In this way, the past

mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make  
the repertory of your grand-mother always bright."

Throughout the novel we find Rao making profuse use of legendary and historical associations where the present is constantly glorified by juxtaposition with the past, and the simple and the petty are raised to epical heights.

The use of the mythical technique forms an important part of the novelist's art of narration. According to Rao, Indians have been great story tellers since times immemorial. He says that Indian grandmothers, sitting by the fire on long and cold winter evenings, have narrated endless tales for the benefit of their grandchildren. These tales are richly reminiscent. As time passes, outlines lose their sharpness and get blurred so that fact and fancy, memory and imagination mingle together in wild profusion. **Kanthapura** is such a tale which has been narrated by an old grandmother, **Achhuaka**, to a newcomer, years after the events had taken place. Residing in a distant village in Mysore, she remembers wistfully the events of those stirring days. As the story proceeds much that is purely fictional and imaginary mingles with the factual. Memories grow dim with the passage of time, much is forgotten and much else is unconsciously modified and glorified. Many of the events acquire new dimensions and, viewed in retrospect, they acquire a significance which they did not possess at the time of their actual occurrence.

Raja Rao tells us,

"And our paths are paths interminable. The **Mahabharatha** has 214, 778 verses and the **Ramayana** 48,000. **Puranas** there are endless and innumerable. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons' to bother us—we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop, our breath stops and we move to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story."

This makes the narration episodic as one episode leads to another making the tale interminably long. Much superfluity can be removed without in any manner harming the storyline. Verbosity and garrulity characterise the narration which is in keeping with the Indian tradition of story-telling. The novelist has made this amply clear by not dividing the novel into chapters. A gap in printing has been used to indicate the end of a night's narration. The second night's narration appears to begin after this gap. The sentences, too, are interminably long, often only one sentence covering one full page. Thus *Kanthapura* is truly an Indian tale told in typical Indian tradition.

Raja Rao's comments on the use of English by Indian writers forms the most valuable part of the *Foreword*. He remarks,

"One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English."

Rao further adds that the Indian writer can write only as an Indian and his

"method of expression, therefore, has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. "

Thus one can conclude from this that Indians are bilingual using two languages, one for the expression of ideas, and the other for the expression of emotions. English, being the language of their intellectual make-up, they have used it since the last two hundred years to express their thoughts and ideas in various fields, philosophical, scientific or economic.

But when emotions need to be expressed, one needs one's own mother-tongue. So it is Rao's suggestion that in order to overcome this difficulty, an Indian writer in English must adapt his English so as to make it a suitable instrument for expressing his emotions as also a true Indian sensibility. Rao strongly feels that Indian writers should not try to imitate the English but rather write like Indians. Instead of using **Babu-English** or English as is used in Oxford and Cambridge, the Indian writer must adapt the English language to Indian needs and, in the process, develop a new dialect which could be branded as Indian English.

Rao himself has tried to Indianise the English language in **Kanthapura** by attempting to adapt in English the idiom, the rhythm, the tone and distinctness of the Kannada Speech. He has simply tried to translate into English the natural speech of the rural folk. In doing so he has given the English language in this novel a colour and flavour that is typically Indian. This was, undoubtedly, a difficult task but accomplished with rare success.

Thus the **Foreword** becomes an important document highlighting some of the problems of the Indian writer in English and putting forward Rao's own unique views on how to solve these problems. It is a hint that, in the pages that follow, Rao has tried to seek a solution and lighted the path which other Indian writers must follow.

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## CHAPTER 3

# Kanthapura

With a background of Western education and a predominantly Western literary orientation, Raja Rao is much aware of individual experience conditioned by historicity and the need for roots in the native tradition. Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* presents an "Indian" identity in a feasible narrative structure employing the ordinary story-telling tradition. We find in this novel the principle of myth operating in the creation of an Indian sensibility. This novel, published in 1938, mainly portrays the Freedom Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920s to liberate India from the British yoke. The novel is predominantly political in inspiration, presenting the confrontation between the static archaic existence of a Hindu village and the historical reality of the present in the form of the Gandhian socio-political agitation. The novelist sympathetically explores the Gandhian values of loving one's enemies, non-violence and abolition of untouchability. His interest in Vedanta is also discernible. He refers to the impact of Vedanta on some of the characters in *Kanthapura*.

In his young days, Raja Rao was influenced by the Gandhian thought and, fascinated by the Gandhian way of living, he spent a few days at Gandhi's *ashram* at Sevagram. He developed a great love for India after his first visit to France in his twenties and kept himself abreast with the political happenings shaping the destiny of India in the pre-independence period. When the Quit India Movement was started by Gandhi in 1942, Raja Rao was

"associated with the underground activities of the young  
socialist leaders."

Mahatma Gandhi at that time wielded a great influence on the Indian masses. He aroused national awakening in Indians with his non-violent struggle for freedom

which was subsequently strengthened by the non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements in the thirties.

***Kanthapura*** is a wonderful rendering of India's struggle for independence which affected even the remotest villages in the country. The Gandhian movement is elevated to a mythological plane. Fascinated by the Indian metaphysical tradition, Rao exalts the Freedom Movement by the use of myths and fables drawn from Indian culture. Mother India "which is the goddess of wisdom and well-being," represents the enslaved daughter of Brahma and, therefore, the gods must incarnate themselves on earth to work for her freedom. At Brahma's command, Shiva incarnates as Gandhi to liberate India from her enforced slavery.

The action of ***Kanthapura*** starts as a narration of life in a remote Kannada village which is protected by the figure of the presiding deity, Kenchamma. The village, Kanthapura, has a static existence, and here peace and piety reign within the traditional and rigid Hindu hierarchy of caste. Moorthy, the main character in this novel takes a leading part in religious activities which, in fact, constitute the life of the village. He is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, a "Gandhi-man" who organises "Gandhi-business" in the form of teaching the untouchables and popularising spinning as a means of economic independence. This new ideology faces opposition from foreign authority represented by the policeman, Badé Khan, and also from the Hindu orthodoxy embodied in Bhatta, the rich money-lender and chief Brahmin of the village. He fears that "The confusion of castes" will lead to the "pollution of progeny" and bring Brahminism to an end. Moorthy is a man of strong idealism who works with missionary zeal among the coolies of the neighbouring Skeffington Coffee estate. He establishes the Congress committee of Kanthapura and courts arrest for seditious activities. On being released, it is he again leading the people of Kanthapura to join the mainstream of the Indian national movement which, at this stage, takes the form of Civil Disobedience. We have the rest of the action following closely the directives of the Indian National Congress and, accordingly, people rally for the enforcement of prohibition, refuse to pay taxes

and attempt also to establish a parallel government. In penal retaliation, the village is subjected to violence and humiliation. Finally, the village loses its very identity as the land belonging to most of its inhabitants is auctioned out to complete strangers. The uprooted inhabitants find shelter in the neighbouring villages where the middle-aged and barren widows go on living almost a similar kind of life as at the beginning of the action, believing the Mahatma to be their saviour. Moorthy, along with many young people of Kanthapura, however, joins the socialist group, having lost faith in the efficacy of the Gandhian ideology.

The narrative structure is mythic and realistic at the same time as Rao himself meant it to be "legendary history". The mythical analogy of the battle between Rama and Ravana has been employed to describe the struggle between the Mahatma and the British Government. A typical Indian archetype is that of an incarnation of God as the saviour of people in distress, establishing righteousness (dharma) and destroying the evil. Historical persons have been deified. In the novel India is compared with Sita, the Mahatma is regarded as Rama and Jawaharlal is considered to be his brother Bharata. The narrator says that Rama represented by Gandhi will return from his exile and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed. The brother Bharata will receive them and, as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers. The Freedom Movement is symbolic of the Devas' struggle against the Asuric (demonic) rule represented by the British. Thus, traditional mythology is ingeniously intertwined with contemporary reality. The mythicising of the movement adds new dimensions to the struggle for independence, for the

"exaggeration of reality by myth is the necessary way of  
achieving the eternity in space"<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Swami Nityabodhananda, *The Myths and Symbols in Indian Civilization* (Madras, 1980), P.7.

The National Movement acquires eternity and symbolic significance as it surpasses the dialectics of history.

Rao's faith in Gandhian thought leads him to idealize Mahatma Gandhi as a veritable god. In *Kanthapura* Moorthy, the mover of action, is a devotee of the Mahatma conceived as an incarnation, the very *avatar* of the Divine, born in this earth to end the suffering of Indian people under British rule. He is portrayed as a symbol of divine power as well as a tangible reality. He is an incarnation of Krishna, the Divine rescuer, and, therefore, will remove the suffering of the Indians. Gandhi

"goes from village to village to slay the serpent of foreign rule."

(P.12)

This is an allusion to Krishna's slaying of the serpent Kaliya. Thus the historical person of the Mahatma is approximated to a well-known archetype acceptable by the common men as reality but for the legendary parallel. Moorthy has a vision of the Mahatma as "mighty and God-beaming." His words repeated by his devotee affect the villagers with the the force of a divine edict. Gandhi preaches the spinning of yarn to his countrymen. Though apparently simple commandments,

"spin and practice *ahimsa* and speak the truth,"

(P.76)

these words embody Gandhi's socio-political ideology. Moorthy asks people to spin in a way that turns economic pragmatism into a religious sanction —

"To wear cloth spun and woven with your own hand is sacred,  
says the Mahatma"

(P.17)

and

"Spinning is as purifying as praying."

(P.19)

Nanjamma, a Brahmin, knowing fully well that it is unseemly for her caste to spin, immediately agrees to spin and accepts the free gift of a spinning wheel. The real



historical objectives of economic self-sufficiency and employment are thus totally subordinated to the transcendental halo surrounding a legendary incarnation. The temporal reality of history is sought to be deprecated by emphasizing the mythological pattern of behaviour.

The Mahatma's political programme is translated into the paraphernalia of worship as practised in the Hindu religion and the whole political action of *Kanthapura*, generated by an *avatar*, centres in the temple of Kanthapurishwari. The election of the Congress Committee is preceded by a God's procession and devotional song. The aim of the Congress has to be explained with an offering of camphor and coconut to the Gods. It is spinning, practising non-violence (*ahimsa*) and speaking the truth that are emphasised with a religious fervour. The picketing at the toddy-grove begins with auspicious decorations, the customary musical accompaniment and the offer of coconut-camphor to the Gods. At the climactic end of the novel we find the final encounter between the people and the repressive force of the foreign authority starting with an elaborate ritual connected with the Satyanarayana Puja. The political programme of Gandhi, placed in historical time, translated into paradigmatic ritual action, tends to conform to a mythical structure.

The fact that Raja Rao summons to his aid the Indian scriptures, particularly the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, for the creation of his myths suggests that he is greatly influenced by the Indian mythic tradition. Since he has a philosophical sensibility he portrays Gandhi as a spiritual leader speaking like Krishna, the philosopher, whose philosophy is enshrined in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Rao's use of myth in *Kanthapura* is effective because it extends our understanding of a particular situation and gives symbolic meaning to the theme undertaken. He is a great artist in that he has assimilated the myth into the narrative. Thus mythicising Mahatma Gandhi as Rama and Krishna in *Kanthapura* makes him an eternal hero. In fact, the entire Freedom Movement in *Kanthapura* has been mythicised. This lends philosophical profundity to the theme of freedom. The national movement

acquires mythic dimensions as Mother India is considered Sita to be freed by Mahatma Gandhi who is mythicised as Lord Rama. The mythic parallel has been so well drawn that the intensity of freedom is at once realised by the people of Kanthapura.

The Gandhian hero, Moorthappa, has been idealized as an extraordinary person. Rangamma describes him as

"Moorthy the good. Moorthy the religious and Moorthy the noble."

(P.104)

The village women consider him to be the saint of Kanthapura and believe that he will always perform holy deeds. Rangé Gowda, the *patel* of the village, describes Moorthy as a legitimate Gandhi of Kanthapura. Moorthy is a local Mahatma while the real Gandhi is a greater deity. The villagers think that Mahatma Gandhi is the Sahyadri Mountain and Moorthy is a small mountain. Pariahs invariably take Moorthy to be a God, for they feel sanctified by his touch. Moorthy is

"an idealized character who like Christ takes all the sins of the people upon himself and undergoes a penance for purification, a young man who conquers physical desire and self-interest."<sup>1</sup>

The village has a legendary significance and the past blends with the present. The traditional belief of the villagers that the Gods walk by lighted streets of Kanthapura during the month of Kartik suggests that the myth co-exists with the contemporary reality. Many a times in the novel we find religion and politics intermingling and the significance of independence expressed in a religious metaphor. The political activity of the inhabitants of Kanthapura gathers strength from their religious faith. The *Harikatha-man*, Jayaramachar, deliberately mixes

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1. Meenaskshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction*, (1971; rpt., Delhi, 1974), P.141.

religion with politics. He talks of Damayanthi and Sakuntala and Yasodha and also about India and Swaraj. The subtlety of the Gandhian thought and the complex political situation of the pre-independence era could be explained to the unlettered villagers only through the legends and religious stories of Gods. As Iyengar puts it,

“the reading of a newspaper becomes as serious a discipline as the reverent reading of the *Gita*, and hand-spinning is elevated to a daily ritual like *puja*. The walls of orthodoxy are suddenly breached : revolution comes as a flood and carries all before it.”<sup>1</sup>

Moorthy initiates the idea of celebrating the Rama festival, the Krishna festival and the Ganesha festival and of having *bhajans* and *harikathas* every month. His spirituality is reflected in his fasts and prayers, giving him political strength. He becomes popular enough to lead the Freedom Movement in Kanthapura and shows a remarkable fortitude for facing imprisonment, severe beatings and even excommunication. The villagers often invoke the Goddess Kenchamma for the success of the movement. It is the recitation of *bhajans* in the Kanthapurishwari temple that generates unity among the masses, for, as the dusk falls, the oil-lamps of the sanctum are lighted, the bell is rung, the conch is blown and men join the gathering from every nook and cranny of the village.

C.D. Narasimhaiah maintains that the novel displays the dynamic power of a living religious tradition, for there is a tremendous religious activity in the novel. He observes that

“religion seems to sustain the spirits of the people of Kanthapura.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. K.R.S.Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (1962; rpt. N.Delhi, 1983), p. 393.

2. C.D.Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* (N. Delhi, n.d.) p. 47.

The villagers are enrolled as members of the Congress in the sanctuary and the oath-taking ceremony is performed before the Gods in the sanctum. Moorthappa invariably asks the recruits to stand before the God and vow they will never break the law. The members voluntarily promise to spin the yarn, practice **ahimsa** (non-violence) and seek truth. It is in the name of Goddess Kenchamma that the people willingly pledge not to drink at the Government -managed toddy booths. As the freedom fighters, picketing the toddy trees, are assaulted by the cruel policemen, they turn to Kenchamma Hill to seek strength from the Goddess for renewed resistance. That is why they rush forward, though the lathis strike their backs, hands and heads. Interestingly enough, whatever success the freedom fighters hope to attain in their struggle against the British is ascribed to the deity they worship. Believing the soul to be immortal and indestructible, the Satyagrahis cheerfully plunge into the Freedom Movement without fear of death. The emphasis on the religious faith of the freedom fighters, who derive inspiration from the **Ramayana** or the **Gita**, affirms the novelist's abiding belief in the eternal values of Indian metaphysics.

Raja Rao appears to be an advocate of Gandhism. Moorthy's belief in the divine efficacy of Gandhism points to Rao's great interest in this philosophy. Moorthy acquires spiritual strength in his very first meeting with Gandhi. His meeting with the "God-beaming Mahatma," who primarily preaches to him his political ideology, provides him with divine revelations. He feels spiritually elevated. Since Moorthy weeps softly and acquires perfect peace and equanimity after seeing the Mahatma, it is obvious that his encounter with the saintly statesman is more in the nature of a mystical experience than political meeting. The fact that Moorthy seeks self-realization after a glimpse of the godly Mahatma evinces his faith in Gandhism.

Rao's fascination for Gandhism is reflected in his affirmation of Gandhian values in the novel. Moorthy invariably preaches the Gandhian principles of non-

violence, love of mankind and abolition of untouchability. His resolve to go on fast because much violence has taken place reflects his belief in non-violence. Seetharamu's willing submission to the torture by the British Government signifies his belief in the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. Before the Civil Disobedience movement is initiated against the British, the freedom-fighters are specifically instructed that their struggle to win freedom must be non-violent. Even an unintentional act of violence should be atoned for by peace and prayer for self-purification.

Gandhi's non-violent revolution was an amazing phenomenon for the whole world. It was a new technique employed by the politically weak against the imperialistic strong. Some of the Gandhian ideals are related to Vedanta. Moorthy's statements,

"Send out love where there is hatred,"

(P.130)

and

"I shall love even my enemies"

(P.66)

though Gandhian in import, are simplified amplifications of the concept of the Universal Self (immanent Atman) enshrined in the Upanishads. As an individual perceives and feels the presence of the same eternal consciousness in all beings, whether friends or foes, he hates none. Gandhi's emphasis on non-attachment to riches is reminiscent of the Vedantic advice that greed for wealth should be dispelled to seek liberation. Jayaramachar speaks of the Gandhian values in the novel. He reiterates the Mahatma's belief that Truth is God and, therefore, the countrymen should speak the truth. This has Vedantic overtones as the ***Bhagavad Gita*** invariably emphasizes truthfulness as a part of human conduct. Moorthy's statement that he is just

"a pebble among the pebbles of the river, and when the floods  
come, rock by rock may lie buried under,"

(P. 131)

suggests that he is one without arrogance — an idea which appears to be based on the *Bhagavad Gita's* teaching that man should give up egoism and arrogance.<sup>1</sup> His recitation of "Sivoham, Sivoham" is Vedantic in spirit. Rangamma who believes in Gandhian values refers to Vedantic philosophy to inspire the Satyagrahis to face the police courageously. As the freedom fighters express their fear in the face of physical attack, she offers the Vedantic advice that no one can hurt the immortal soul :

"No, sister that is not difficult. Does not the Gita say, the sword  
can split asunder the body, but never the soul ?"

(P. 110)

The omnipresence of God, alluded to in the novel is, undoubtedly, drawn from Vedantic philosophy. When the female freedom fighters are left stranded in the forest, haunted by leopards and other wild animals, they seek moral strength and fortitude from their belief in the omnipresence of God to face the hazards before them. Their statement,

"Wheresoever we look you are there, my Lord!"

(P.136)

has Vedantic connotations. In Advaita Vedanta, Brahman, who is invariably one, possesses the characteristic of all-pervadingness. The peasants' belief in *karma* philosophy is also Vedantic in its origin. Seetharamu's wilful resignation to his haematemeses, caused by the inhuman treatment meted out to him in the prison, is

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1. The *Bhagavad Gita*, XVIII. 53.

attributed by him to his **karma**. Moorthy also advises his fellow freedom fighters to bear their punishment as though their **karma** willed it.

The mystical experience of Moorthy shows that he follows the Vedantic discipline for self-realization. He undergoes self-transformation before becoming an undisguised Gandhi of Kanthapura. Walking up to the temple, he sits beside the central pillar of the **mandap** and begins to meditate. He says **gayatri mantra** three thousand and eight times and enters deeper into meditation. His meditations lead him to the love of mankind. He recollects the spiritual experience of his childhood. He recalls how as a youngster he, like the child Prahlada, longed to see Hari and how he felt that he

“floated away like child Krishna on the pipal leaf”

(P. 67)

in the whirling floods. He also recollects how in his tender age he had acquired the spiritual power of controlling the floods. He claims that he once sat and prayed on the banks of the Himavathy when it was terribly flooded. As a result, the water in the river receded to its normal shores. His spiritual progress is also reflected in the remarkable transformation of his personality. He has overcome lust and covetousness. That is why when Ratna comes to see him, she finds something different in his feelings towards her. Her smiles do not attract him for he can think of her only as a sister. He rather exhorts her to pray with him so that the sins of others may be purified. Moorthy's thus transcending physical desire is unequivocally Vedantic in import, for the **Gita** recommends sexual containment as the means of spiritual attainment. His spiritual development reflected in his sexual abstinence, non-attachment to riches and his recitation of “Sivoham” are all obviously expressive of his belief in Vedantic philosophy.

C. D. Narasimhaiah strongly feels that Moorthy represents Raja Rao for

“the authors's own self is projected, so largely projected in the character of Moorthy; and considering the circumstances and

the temptations, the identification of the young author with the young Moorthy appears to be inescapable, inevitable."<sup>1</sup>

So it may be affirmed that the protagonist's thirst for God is undoubtedly Raja Rao's own quest for truth. Moorthy's resort to meditation culminating in his mystical experience obviously stems from the state of the authors's spiritual awareness.

At this point mention may be made of the fact that in the novel one finds also a contradiction between Gandhism in principle and its actual translation into action. Moorthy upholds the Gandhian ideology as a simplistic formula for the benefit of the illiterate devotees. But we find that even the three cardinal principles are not obeyed. Rangé Gowda for eg. almost always deviates from the non-violent ideal. During the actual salt agitation, almost all incidents tend to descend into force. When Moorthy tries to explain the Gandhian ideal of loving one's enemy, even his docile women listeners are baffled. Far more than passive resistance is put up when they face the attachment of their properties. During the frenzy of persecution unleashed by the British Government, the pent-up urge for violence and revenge is released through actions like setting fire to Bhatta's house though Bhatta has left the village long before the actual agitation and therefore has no perceptible role to play in the police atrocities. This action of setting fire to Bhatta's forsaken home at once sets aside Gandhian morality. So, when beside the ashes of Bhatta's burnt home and hearth the Gandhian slogan of universal love is repeated, it becomes a hollow mockery, a senseless mechanical incantation. This is a sharp juxtaposition of the historic reality of vindictive violence and the ideal of non-violence and love. Thus we find a deep gulf separating the mythical pattern of action from the concrete existential reality and one gets two narrative structures, mythical and realistic, which are constantly contradicting and trying to negate each other. In the climax of the novel we find much violence, hatred and animosity when

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1. Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* P. 44



"men grip men and men crush men and men bite men and men  
tear men."

(P. 183)

Moorthy alone appears to be a true devotee of Gandhi when he maintains a very firm stand on truth and refuses to have a defence lawyer during his trial. Only he is true to the basic Gandhian ideology and avoids any direct confrontation with unbelief or criticism. The rest of the Kanthapurans seem unconcerned about Gandhi's specific insistence on the ethics of a method employed when they take out a political procession under religious guise. Patel Rangé Gowda, who represents the common people of Kanthapura, straightaway rejects the Gandhian ethics of love and non-violence which, according to him, is meant only for superior human beings, besides being completely useless in day-to-day life. In the final criticism of the Gandhi-Irwin pact which has necessitated the withdrawal of the agitation that wipes out Kanthapura, Moorthy's bitterness echoes the frustration which is actually felt by a whole generation of Indians. Moorthy writes to Ratna :

"Have faith in your enemy, he (i.e. Gandhi) says, have faith in  
him and convert him. But the world of men is hard to move, and  
once in motion it is wrong to stop till the goal is reached."

(P. 188)

In this recognition of failure of a political programme at a specific point of history, the legendary pattern of the unvarying success of the divine saviour is completely shattered. The people of Kanthapura pray to the Goddess Kenchamma. In all their traditional activities, Kenchamma remains the presiding deity. But one finds that the historical action of the novel ushered in by the Gandhian ideology is *not* in any way connected with Kenchamma. Significantly enough, the traditional Kenchamma has no part to play in the introduction and dissemination of Gandhian thought, nor is the temple of Kenchamma the scene of crucial happenings. It is the temple of Kanthapurishwari, an entirely new construction, that constitutes the centre of all activities related to the Gandhian

theme. It becomes the proper venue for reciting Harikatha in which Gandhi is introduced as the new *avatar*. It is here that the members of the newly-formed Congress party take their oaths. On the commencement of the Civil Disobedience movement, it is here that Moorthy calls for unity, and it is here again that the villagers gather to consider the future course of action. It is from here that the signal is given for the ultimate action in the novel.

As one moves along the pages of *Kanthapura*, one finds the glory of the *avatar* tarnished by reality. Unlike the devotee Prahlada, a prototype of Moorthy who is saved by the Lord at every crisis, Moorthy does get a prison sentence. The blind faith of the people of Kanthapura leads them to expect the Mahatma to be blessed by the Gods as Harishchandra was in the legend and the British to leave India by divine intervention. This exalted hope gets crushed when it confronts reality in the person of Doré, the university-turned man of the village who comments. :

" This is all *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; such things  
never happen in our times."

(P. 125).

And he is proved right because such things do not happen in the course of events that lead to the destruction of the village. The religious minded villagers follow the path of the Mahatma expecting a miraculous rescue which never materializes. One notices a sense of frustration persisting in spite of all protestation of faith in the Mahatma, climaxing in the last symbolic gesture of Patel Rangé Gowda who spits and throws a handful of dust at the "sunken wretch" that was Kanthapura, their archaic existence. He thus expresses his intense suffering,

"to tell you the truth, Mother, my heart it beat like a drum."

(P.190)

Thus throughout the novel we find a juxtaposition of myth and reality. The novelist has maintained a queer balance between myth and reality by upholding

the mythical beliefs of the characters which are at once negated by reality. This careful balancing of myth and reality places Rao high in the opinion of the sensible reader who notices him not completely swept away by religious sentiments but also having a foothold in the reality of history. This alternating of religion with reality gives the novel its own peculiar charm.

*Kanthapura* is primarily a novel about India's Freedom Movement. Gandhism forms the basis of the book and the novel expounds the Gandhian values of non-violence and abolition of untouchability. The tremendous religious activity, the mythicising of Gandhi and Mother India, the spiritualization of the Freedom Movement within the framework of Indian cultural tradition suggest Raja Rao's zeal for Indian philosophy. The references to the *karma* philosophy, the omnipresence of God, the immortality of soul and the doctrine of incarnation which are derived from the *Bhagavad Gita* signify the novelist's fascination for Vedanta.

For Rao, the Indian ethos is essentially orthodox, a point which he tries to make clear early in the novel where he highlights the fact of Badé Khan, a Muslim, being unwelcome in a Hindu village not in an abstract statement but in a concrete situation. He portrays the Patel as "a veritable tiger" and the most powerful man in the village giving a cold reception to Badé Khan, an important government official. Rao gives a detailed account of the gestures and actions by which Patel Rangé Gowda shows his disrespect for the Muslim. The description contains specific gestures and concrete actions showing the Patel's contempt as also Badé Khan's, impotent fury. These carry further implications because in the Patel's behaviour one reads the script of a whole community reacting against British rule.

Then we have the instance of Moorthy, the Brahmin, who has been socially ostracised because of his association with untouchables. Later, of course, this is compensated by his martyrdom of a short imprisonment which makes him the "little Mahatma" of the village.

Though **Kanthapura** was written in France thousands of miles away from India, it gives a most graphic, vivid and realistic account of the Gandhian freedom struggle in the 1930s and its impact on the Indian masses. Kanthapura is an obscure, slumbering South Indian village which suddenly comes to life due to the non-violent, non-co-operation movement of Gandhi in the twenties. In handling this theme Rao quickens it to activity and thus gives us an insight into the appalling social conditions of our villages as also into the values that have preserved our people against flood, fire, famine and exploitation from within and from without — and above all, the incomparable manner in which Gandhi tapped the deeply religious and spiritual resources of our people living in the remotest parts of India and built up a national movement in a lifetime.

Moorthy is the central figure of the novel who organises all the villagers for the Gandhian mode of action. The entire gamut of action is centred round Moorthy who is a staunch follower of Gandhi and who is responsible for launching the Gandhian Civil Disobedience movement in this remote secluded village. He has been educated in the city from where he has arrived in this village with the message of the Mahatma. He gives a practical shape to the Gandhian programme of **Swadeshi** and eradication of untouchability by going from door to door even in the Pariah quarters of the village and explaining to the villagers the significance of Gandhi's struggle for independence. He explains the economics of **Charkha** and **Swadeshi**. He inspires the women to take to charkha-spinning and weaving their own cloth. He later on organises the formation of the women voluntary corps. Though he faces opposition initially from the ignorant, the conservative and vested interests, he shows great courage and determination and enlists the help of influential people like Rangé Gowda. Thus he becomes instrumental in creating a general awakening and we have an atmosphere highly charged with emotion and enthusiasm as reports regarding Gandhi's Dandi March to break the Salt Law reach Kanthapura.

Reports of the enthusiastic public support of the Dandi March do much to boost the public morale in the village and soon there are **Satyagrahs** and picketings. The villagers, under the leadership of Moorthy, offer **Satyagrah** outside the toddy plantation. This leads to reaction from the British Government, and gives rise to a chain of actions with Moorthy getting arrested and imprisoned. In his absence his work is looked after by Ratna who organises and trains the village women. We find the villagers putting up a brave resistance but they are ultimately compelled to flee because their morale is broken. They leave Kanthapura, trudging along for miles over unknown territory till they find shelter in a remote village. They have been defeated, yet in their defeat lies their victory. Their brave resistance has given a jolt to the British Government as many such jolts in other parts of the country. Thus their heroic struggle is a milestone in the Freedom Movement of India.

**Kanthapura** is thus a novel dealing with the impact of the Gandhian freedom struggle on a remote sleepy village in South India. Gandhi does not make a personal appearance in the entire novel but his presence is constantly felt in the background because every now and then we find references to important national events related to Gandhi. So, without actually introducing him into the novel, Rao has skilfully made his impact felt. His presentation of the Gandhian movement is impartial and objective. There has been no idealisation; both the bright and dark sides of the picture have been presented. Idealisation has been placed side by side with the depiction of petty jealousies and trivialities of village life. There are Ratna, Rangamma and Patel Rangé Gowda on the one hand and Bhatta, Waterfall Venkamma and Badé Khan on the other. Even Moorthy's character has not been idealised because he, too, is shown displaying the necessary human weakness and hesitation in entering a Pariah's hut and tasting drink offered by him.

**Kanthapura** has a typical Indian theme in that a typical Indian village of that name has been described minutely with great realism. Its location, its crops,

its grinding poverty, illiteracy and superstition — all find mention. The novelist penetrates into the rivalries, jealousies and rigidities of the caste system that lie below the surface. The villagers have been presented in realistic colours.

The women have an important role in the novel. They are presented as various forms of **Shakti**. Each of them is enthused at the proper time. Psychologically prepared for the titanic encounter, they get much inspiration from the examples of others. It is noteworthy that Ratna plays the lead role in the last phase of the peaceful resistance when she takes over from Moorthy and leads the Satyagrahis. **Shakti-worship** is an essentially Indian theme which runs through **Kanthapura**. **Shakti's** indomitable spirit possesses the women of Kanthapura in their non-violent struggle against the British rule. Woman as the Eternal Devotee, **Shakti** kneeling in rapt adoration before Shiva, reveals herself through the women folk of Kanthapura as they listen to Jayaramachar retelling epic stories and to Ramakrishnayya reading passages from the Scriptures. The narrator's musing on the ruins of Kanthapura is the most touching example of their edifying faith when she dreams of a happy ending to a modern **Ramayana** where Rama (Gandhi) is supposed to free Sita (India) from the clutches of Ravana (the British) and return to Ayodhya (Delhi) where Bharata (Nehru) is awaiting them.

For a typically Indian theme Rao has used a typically Indian mode of treatment by way of narration, imagery, proverbs and idioms. He has also made use of peasant speech. All these add up to conveying an essentially Indian sensibility. The greater details about this are given in the Preface to **Kanthapura** which is a very important document in which Rao has mentioned almost all that he wished to express in the novel.

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## Comrade Kirillov

Comrade Kirillov appears to be deficient in the depths of thought that characterise Rao's later fiction. M.K. Naik observes, it

"evidently lacks both the range and scope of *The Serpent* and *the Rope*, and the metaphysical profundity of *The Cat* and *Shakespeare*."<sup>1</sup>

It is a novel with a flat succession of events which do not culminate perceptibly into a climax to be followed by an emotional release and purgation. Its structure consists of different segments organized as parallels to the same thematic axis. Therefore, unlike Rao's other novels which emphasize a continuous flow, *Comrade Kirillov* is marked into different blocks, separated from each other.

In the portrayal of the novel's theme and characters, Raja Rao seems to have been greatly influenced by the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky. The following epigraph to the novel, borrowed from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, points to the underlying theme in *Comrade Kirillov*.

Stravogin : "Tell me, have you caught your hare? To cook  
your hare you must first catch it; to believe in  
God you must first have God...Do you  
believe in God?

Shatov : 'I, – I *will* believe in God.'

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1. M.K. Naik, *Raja Rao*, p. 143.

In *The Possessed*, Stravogin and Shatov, in the beginning, believe in the liberating energies of the imminent Russian Revolution. They feel that the new advent will take place in Russia. Like Shatov, the protagonist in *Comrade Kirillov*, Padmanabha Iyer, also known as Kirillov, pins his faith in the revolutionary zeal of Russia and of Stalin who alone can bring about a change and create a new world. Kirillov, the name of Raja Rao's protagonist, is borrowed from *The Possessed*. Dostoevsky's Kirillov is an atheist. His Indian counterpart, too, considers God "the fiction of the lazy!" On the one hand, Padmanabha shares with Dostoevsky's Kirillov his interest in Communism while, on the other, he shares with Shatov the love of the land – a feeling reflected in his recitation of Sanskrit verses from Indian classics. His inherent love for India parallels Shatov's fervent love for Russia. Thus Padmanabha represents both Kirillov and Shatov in different ways.

Each of the first two sections narrates the biography of Padmanabha Iyer, a South Indian Brahmin (like Rao and all his heroes) in the third person. The narrator, Rama, like Rao, is an Indian. Moreover, he is a Gandhian and a Vedantin. In each section one finds the narration leading to an ideological crisis presented as a dialogue between Padmanabha called Kirillov and Rama. At first we learn about Padmanabha's noble birth, Westernized education, disgust with modern India and also with Hindu orthodoxy. We are also told about his temporary frustrating experience with Theosophy and his final choice of Communism. During the notorious purges of Stalin, Rama meets him and wants him to join in the protest against the Moscow trial. Padmanabha refuses and justifies the Party's stand.

The second section deals with Padmanabha's slow and painstaking growth leading to his becoming a good Communist standing firmly behind the Party's policy to oppose Gandhi's call for a nationalist agitation against the British in 1942. Despite the victory of the Gandhian movement, Padmanabha continues to



be a Communist. But we learn that he has always remained an orthodox South Indian Brahmin despite his marriage to Irene, a Czech Communist, who dies in childbirth leaving a son, Kamal.

In the third section we get to know Padmanabha from Irene's point of view. Her entries in her diary reveal the subterranean "Indianness" of Padmanabha ensconced not only in an orthodox life style or a sentimental adoration of Gandhi, but in a Brahminic knowledge of the Sanskrit philosophical grammar. This Indianness forms, on the one hand, the main attraction of Padmanabha to Irene, yet spells on the other hand the doom of the marriage. Her death in childbirth seems inevitable following the entry

"I shall never go to India."

(P. 120)

In the last section, Padmanabha has disappeared behind the impenetrable Communist curtains. But India wins, for his son Kamal, growing up with Indian grandparents, is placed by the narrator Rama in the temple of Kanyakumari and finds India embodied in Parvati, an eternal virgin waiting for her bridegroom Shiva.

\* In this novel Padmanabha is called Kirillov which makes it evident that Communism can mean only suicide for an Indian. Hence Padmanabha's pen which he uses for writing his Communist thesis is compared to a revolver. An interesting point is Rao's constant reference to Shatov, the other member of Dostoevsky's famous "double". One feels that Padmanabha in his innate love for India and a sort of orthodox behaviour, manifested in his mechanical repetition of Sanskrit slokas, vegetarianism, etc., approximates Shatov's fervent love of Russia and orthodoxy. Being both Kirillov and Shatov, the Communist atheist and the nationalist orthodox, Padmanabha remains a soul forever held between the cleft of "India and Marx – a symbol of perpetual crisis."<sup>1</sup> \*

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\* 1. The importance of the double as a central pattern in Dostoevsky's characterization explained by Irving Howe, *"Dostoevsky : The Politics of Salvation"* (quoted by Esha Dey in *The Novels of Raja Rao*).

In one of his letters to M.K. Naik, Raja Rao states :

"The use of Kirillov from Dostoevsky is to show how one is a prisoner of ideology."<sup>1</sup>

The theme of ***Comrade Kirillov*** is indicative of the disapprobation of Communism as it is represented by an Indian. The name "Kirillov" assigned to Padmanabha Iyer, the continuous references to Shatov in the narrative and the epigraph heighten the significance of the theme in the novel. Kirillov's adherence to Communism as well as his attachment to Theosophy and Gandhism make him a split personality prone to kill himself. Therefore, Padmanabha's pen is compared to a revolver suggesting the possibilities of a suicide.

Padmanabha initially believes that the regeneration of India depends on the outcome of Theosophy. However, he is soon disillusioned with Theosophy as the idea of the misery of Indian peasants makes him doubtful about its potentialities to eradicate poverty and starvation from India. The recollection of the sights of human degradation and awful humiliation of man in India turns him to Communism. The Russian Revolution appears to him a remarkable experiment that had turned Russia into

"the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics."

(P.15)

Padmanabha's attempts to study Marx and Engels in German, and his landing at Liverpool with a heavy load of Marxist literature, reveal his leanings towards Communism. His categorical refusal to put his signature on the manifesto, demanding a fair trial of "the Moscow accused," termed denigrates, affirms his loyalty to Communism advocated by the "Soviet Fathers".

Though a comment on Kirillov's ideological commitments, the Indian element in the novel is highlighted by the fact that Rao makes it a parody of an Indian's

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1. Naik, *Raja Rao*, p. 145.

protestations of Communism. The protagonist, a typical South Indian Brahmin, displays his great interest in the metaphysical tradition of India. M.K. Naik observes :

"While his intellect subscribes to Marxism, his heart obstinately continues to wear its Brahmanical sacred thread though he hates to admit the fact."<sup>1</sup>

Kirillov is rooted in the Brahminic culture of his land; and the narrator, Rama, aptly points out that his Indianhood would put an end to his faith in Communism. Rama ridicules Kirillov's Communist stance because he possesses Brahminic habits and the compassion of a Catholic priest. His parody of killing Kirillov symbolically actualizes an extrinsic fondness of an Indian for Communism.

"I used to mock at him, 'Suicide is your end — or the Buddhist royal-robe."

(P.72).

Rama's reference to "the Buddhist yellow-robe" and "the Buddhist path of non-Becoming" meant for Kirillov signify the death of his Communist rationale. Rama says that had Kirillov been capable of free thinking and not tied to a dogma, he would not have fallen victim to an intellectual death.

The parody of Communism is heightened as Kirillov is projected as a hypothetical Buddha. To seek enlightenment he would have his hair cut and thrown into the high air and his glasses let sail on the river Niranjana while the hungry Kantaka would take a leap into space. He is determined to seek salvation. He will sit under the tree and dismiss Mara who blows the trumpets of Marshal Stalin and Father Lenin. The narrator imagines Kirillov attaining the Truth like Buddha and undertaking a holy pilgrimage to Benaras. However, the idea of

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1. Naik, *Raja Rao*, p. 148.

Kirillov's salvation through Buddhism is a mere speculation. His subsequent departure to Moscow to pursue Communism is a travesty of his adherence to Buddhism.

Raja Rao ironically exposes the hollowness of the protagonist by comparing Kirillov's Communist logic with the anonymity of the *sanyasis*. Kirillov is akin to the sadhus when he uses the words *janta ke* instead of *hamare*, thus proclaiming to be nameless and above the considerations of caste, clan or creed. The sadhus often say that they have given up their hearth and home. Kirillov announces in the same manner :

"Anonymous my name... Logic my religion, Communism my  
motherland"

(P.71)

This proclamation of Kirillov juxtaposed with the creed of Indian sadhus, apparently reveals his limitations as a Communist. What lends significance to the theme is Raja Rao's ironic description of Kirillov's dress, particularly the necktie that reflects the latter's ambivalent attitude.

The problem in *Comrade Kirillov* does not lie in Rao's presentation of Indian Communists alone. Rather, Rao regards "Indianness" to be the focal point of all his creative effort. This concept is also the thematic axis in *Comrade Kirillov*. Rao's concept of India has a remarkable resemblance with Dostoevsky's idea of Russia . Dostoevsky conceives Russia, orthodoxy and Christianity as a composite as absolute as the Holy Trinity. It forms the theme of Dostoevsky's entire literary inspiration, revealed especially in *The Possessed*. For him, Russia is not a political or historical entity, but rather a question of perspective of abstraction :

"Russia is not a republic. It is not Jacobinism or Communism.

Russia is no more or no less than the embodiment of  
orthodoxy."

The Indian identity for Rao , is inextricably bound with orthodoxy and a particular branch of Hindu philosophy viz. Advaita Vedanta. Besides, Rao's India has a destiny, like Dostoevsky's Russia, to be apprehended with a missionary fervour. For his hero Ramaswamy, "India is the Guru to the world." Indeed one is convinced of the author's claim, "India is culture."<sup>1</sup>

Kirillov's big flapping coat that misfits his tiny shoulders obviously displays his enigmatic personality. At the superficial level one perceives his unfailing admiration of Marxism and disapprobation of Gandhism – the ideologies that stand poles apart. He considers the Gandhian morality fattening itself on the **Marwari capitalism** to be a sign of "vulgarity". Mahatma Gandhi, opposing violence with passionate vigour and permitting sex only in terms of "theological necessities" is a "kleptomaniac" according to Kirillov. He considers Gandhi's approach to be "unscientific" and thinks that he should have been "born in the Middle Ages." He also believes a true Marxist to be a realist. Surprisingly enough, in this novel, the same Gandhi who is dubbed as "kleptomaniac" and "unscientific" is also extolled as emblematic and is transformed into the embodiment of true India :

"The Communist Party backed Britain, and lost their 1917.

Mahatma Gandhi won. He would always win, for he knew India."

(P.69).

The narrator remarks that Kirillov does not bear a word against Mahatma Gandhi, and Irene, too, comments in her diary that at heart Gandhi is her husband's God. These point to the protagonist being a divided man. Irene points out that Kirillov does not like any European, or even a Communist to speak against

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1. Raja Rao, "I believe India is the direction of sensibilities and refinements the world never surpassed. In many ways one can say, India is culture." Interview by Elizabeth Wohl, "Raja Rao on America," p. 35.

the Congress or Gandhi. But, discussing Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, Kirillov also criticizes him severely. He holds that a time will come when the economic condition of India's working classes will deteriorate and they will rise in revolt against the Mahatma and his henchmen who will then lose control over the Indian masses. In his book entitled ***Mahatma Gandhi – A Marxist Interpretation***, Kirillov denounces Gandhi as a "stupefying fool" and "sadhu reactionary" who still believes in caste and creed and who will set history many centuries backwards. However, Irene's evaluation of her husband's character is more reliable than Kirillov's own assumption about himself. In her diary Irene observes that Padmanabha has seen Gandhi and he is charmed by his sweet presence. He feels proud that Mahatma Gandhi has read his book on India and admired it.

These self-contradictory attitudes of Kirillov point out clearly that ambivalence is a characteristic trait of his personality. In his subconscious he suffers a conflict between his Communist affiliations and his love for India at that time symbolized by Gandhi. The outcome is his simultaneous allegiance to Marxism and Gandhism. However, his criticism of Gandhi is an offshoot of his proclaimed loyalty to the Communist party which found in Gandhism a formidable challenge to Marxism in the pre-independence era. Thus the author ironically as well as effectively portrays an Indian Communist torn between his emotional attachment to the spiritual values of India and his political commitments. Raja Rao's own words summing up the theme of the novel are :

"My main point in this *nouvella* is to show how one can be sincere and honest – and yet fundamentally dishonest."<sup>1</sup>

Apart from being a critique of Communism, this work is also an adumbration of the social, political and metaphysical aspects of India. Kirillov portrays India as a

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1. Raja Rao's letter dated July 29, 1981, addressed to M.K. Naik quoted by Naik in his *Raja Rao*, p. 148.

victim of hunger, poverty and exploitation under the feudal structure, thus revealing Indian social life before freedom. One finds references to Kirillov's elders owning big chunks of land and living in palatial houses, the villainy of the local money-lenders in the feudal set-up of India during the British rule, and also the miserable sight of "the thin-legged" peasant driving his bullocks which points to the condition of India reeling under poverty and starvation. Kirillov proclaims Indian politics to be "a good *Masala*" and a mixture of ginger and cinnamon, coriander and chilli. This, followed by his reference to the Nehru-Mountbatten friendship and the Viceroy's daughter attending the Mahatma's prayers, is a satire on the confused nature of politics in the then India. Kirillov makes a satirical mention of Gandhi's role in Indian politics which may be said to emanate from his commitments to the Communist party which had launched a tirade against the Indian leader during the Freedom Movement. Kirillov thus represents many an Indian youth who, in the pre-independence days, looked upon the Soviet system as the ideal political arrangement.

The novel could be interpreted as a commentary on the Indian and Russian ideologies represented simultaneously by Kirillov who vacillates between his love for India's spiritual heritage and his deep interest in dialectic materialism. The narrative also raises the question as to whether an Indian, steeped profoundly in the metaphysical tradition of his country, can simultaneously profess to be a Marxist. In other words, it is also an indicator of the inevitable conflict between the ideologies of the East and West.

Irene gets alienated from Kirillov and nurses a hatred for India on the ground that her husband's

"Indianness will rise up once he touches the soil of his land and  
all this Occidental veneer will scuttle into European hatred."

(P.113).

This affirms the idea that on the spiritual and emotional planes, "never the twain shall meet." Moreover, Irene's apprehension about not being accepted by her

husband's people because she is a bourgeois, points to the fundamental difference between the cultures of the East and the West.

Though the novel represents, through its hero, the views of an Indian Communist, yet Gandhi is ultimately declared invincible. But Rao's Marxist hero evades a fundamental question viz. the specific definition of the Gandhian ideal, his concept of Swaraj and Ramrajya raised by Moorthy at the end of *Kanthapura*. Through Padmanabha, Rao spells out the typical Communist viewpoint with which he himself had at one time sympathized. But, later, becoming an orthodox Brahmin, he reacted to it. It is this change of attitude which may be said to determine the tone of the text. Rao has projected Gandhism emerging victorious in achieving Indian independence rather than Communism with its proletariat revolution.

In *Comrade Kirillov* one finds again that Padmanabha's Marxist stand constitutes a defence of Stalin and a condemnation of Trotsky as an impediment to the historical process :

"Trotsky is a traitor, I say. A traitor for me is not my moral enemy, but my historical opponent. I know simpletons write that Trotsky has sold out to the capitalists. I know, as far as I can, that Trotsky is not the one to be bribed by capitalists into their golden dens. Trotsky, like Zinoviev and Kameniev; was an instrument in a great historical process. For that matter, so is Stalin. If Stalin went against history, history would not spare him because he is Stalin. History is the respecter of no individual.... I am a communist because I understand history."

(P. 44-45).

Yet, going through *Comrade Kirillov* we find that the volley of "Indian" attack is directed at the absence of God in Communism. Padmanabha in his destructive "spider web," "prison-cell" logic expounds,



"Metaphysical enquiry, I now say, is due to rachitism – it is like a disease caused by vitamin deficiency. God is the fiction of the lazy."

(P. 40).

For the Communist, God seems a negation. For the Indian on the other hand it is Communism that is annihilation. The narrator says:

"And once you have fed the Indian millions and given them nice houses to live in and railways for their monthly holidays, and sanatoria and the Dnipershtet for the electric illumination of India – what then, brother, is to become of your despair, your emotional upheavals, your metaphysical yearning, your Godward beckonings?"

(P.40)

The narrator Rama is the official self of the author that has been established before the eye of the reader. But one finds another self hidden in Padmanabha which is indicated by his probable likeness to Shatov, and which may indeed hold a true resemblance to Rao himself. In fact, the reference to Shatov serves a dual purpose. Besides suggesting Padmanabha's subterranean love for India, it may very well be a symbol of Rao's own ambivalence to the very concept of India. Shatov professes his belief in Russia, orthodoxy and Christianity, the Holy Trinity of Dostoevsky. But, like Raja Rao, he had a stint of revolutionary association, although later on he desperately desires to cut himself away from it. The corruption generated by the "noble socialist ideal" however has left its indelible mark on his orthodox self. Hence, when Stavrogin, the black **Guru** of the double, mercilessly challenges his faith in God, Shatov becomes furious :

"I believe in Russia... I believe in the Greek orthodox church. I—

I believe in the body of Christ... I believe that second coming

will take place in Russia.... I believe ..."Shatov murmured in a frenzy, "But in God? In God?" "I shall believe in God."

This desperate hesitancy, enshrined as the very epigraph of Rao's novel, belongs as much to the character Padmanabha or Kirillov as to Rao himself, so there is the obsessive tendency to refer to Shatov again and again in the narrative although one finds no resemblance between the action of Padmanabha's story and that of Shatov.

The new life created for Irene and Padmanabha has no emotional background, neither is there a sensual acceptance of the body, but a sort of dehydrated victory of India in abstraction :

Kirillov even meditated, in expiation, upon the birth of a child —  
he would now have a child, they would now have a boy, and he  
would be an Indian.

(P. 58)

Objects and abstractions thus dominate over human characters in ***Comrade Kirillov***.

The dramatic ending, though abrupt, marks the summation of the theme of the novel. The "Bohemian cut-glass casket" carrying Irene's and her daughter's ashes to be immersed in the Cauvery, the arrival of Kamal at his grandfather's place in Trichinopoly, followed by his pilgrimage to Kanyakumari to discover India, Rama's description of the tale of Shiva and Parvati in a bid to revive the love of India in Kamal, and Kamal's collection of the diamonds and rubies of Parvati's "wedding-shells in blue" to be sent to his father, Kirillov, in Peking — all these events collectively reinforce the essence of India in the novel and imprint upon the reader's mind that singular quality of the Indian, his love for his motherland. The exaltation of Parvati as India sums up the theme of the novel viz. that India loves her children and they will never belie the faith reposed in them :

As long as Lord Siva is in Kailash and the holy Ganga flows from  
his hair, Indians will not betray their land."<sup>1</sup>

The author holds that India is like Parvati, who, in love with life, goes to the  
South to immerse herself in the enjoyment of this phenomenal reality —

"beautiful fruits, flowers, perfumes, medicinal herbs, precious  
stones, sweet water to drink, fresh and sweet to the taste like  
cow's first milk....."

(P. 125)

which she refuses to renounce in a travel up the cold Himalayas to meet her  
consort Shiva who, lost in meditation, fails to arrive at the auspicious hour of  
marriage. The question that naturally comes to our mind in terms of the novel's  
context is, who is Lord Shiva? We find no visible clue in the text and Parvati is left  
forever awaiting her indifferent bridegroom. Since Parvati is "India," the forgetful  
consort could point towards the recalcitrant Indian Marxist. On the other hand, it  
could be the orthodox Brahmin bent on salvation alone.

A close study of the novel reveals that Kirillov imbibes some traits of Raja  
Rao's personality . Like Rao, Kirillov is a South Indian Brahmin as well as an  
expatriate. His knowledge of Sanskrit and foreign languages is similar to that of  
Rao who knows Sanskrit, French, English and Latin. Kirillov visits several  
countries such as America, England and Russia in search of his identity and  
ultimately concludes that "India is of every Indian" and Indians cannot alienate  
themselves from their land. Similarly Rao's quest for truth eventually consummates  
in his devotion to Indian philosophy. Kirillov arrives with a messianic spirit to the  
Californian coast where through "theosophical selectivity" he wishes to establish  
the new Benaras and is determined that he would be one of the five favourite

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1. *Comrade Kirillov*, quoted from the blurb.

disciples of "the great Master of human race," who, since the days of Krishna and Rama, would rule and reveal the future of India. These are reminiscent of Raja Rao's enthusiasm in teaching Indian philosophy at Texas and his aim of spreading the message of the metaphysical India.

One gets a glimpse of the author's vision and values from the character of Rama who represents Raja Rao himself. Rao's fascination for the Gandhian thought and the non-dualistic philosophy of Sankara becomes manifest when Rama is called

"a Gandhian and a Vedantin and an Indian"

(P. 26)

despite his exposure to Western culture. Rama's Indianness is reflected in that he hates European customs. Moreover, his goodwill gesture of taking Kamal on a pilgrimage to South India affirms Rao's deep involvement with India. Interesting to note is Rama's resemblance of Rao in physique and his understanding of philosophy which signifies Raja Rao's keen perception of Indian metaphysics. Also worth noting is the fact that the narrator beats everyone down "wickedly" in argument.

*Comrade Kirillov*, we find, lacks the philosophical penetration that characterises the later novels of Rao viz. ***The Serpent and the Rope*** and ***The Cat and Shakespeare***. However, it abounds in philosophical speculations on Theosophy, Gandhism, Communism, and Albigensian heresy. Kirillov's observations about the Albigensians that they were a small religious community which believed in vegetarianism, reincarnation, rebirth of animals and "the spiritual values of Lettuce" and that they were "Some European incarnation of the Hindu" are the consequence of Raja Rao's study during the research project "Mysticism of the West" which he undertook for his doctoral degree in Europe.

In the novel one also finds casual references to Vedantic and Tantric philosophies. Some of the characters in the novel are influenced by the non-dualistic philosophy of Sankara. The narrator Rama, proclaiming himself to be a Vedantin, frequently hums Sankara's verses. Padmanabha also delightfully recites Sankara's hymns clapping his hands and vying with Rama in intonation and precision. Kirillov's humming of *Sivoham* followed by Sankara's *Nirvana Astakam*, reflect his love for the non-dualistic Vedantic philosophy.

The reference to the *chakras* in the novel has Tantric overtones. The *chakras* are the six Tantric centers – the *muladhara*, *svadhisthan*, *manipura*, *anahata*, *visuddha* and *sahasrar* which represent various states of consciousness. The narrator's exhortation to the people to meditate on the *chakras*, and his observation that one could lead an "earthly life" along with the "heavenly one" affirm strongly Rao's own growing belief in the efficacy of Tantra that prescribes the attainment of liberation through pleasures of the world – a theme which acquires metaphysical dimensions in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. The reference to the great "Mother of mankind" adept in Tibetan mysteries and to whom

"the glow of the Final Incarnate would be revealed soon... and  
amidst a thousand lotus-petal opals"

(P.9)

appears to be Tantric in import because it alludes to the Tibetan Tantric deity absorbed in *sahasrar*, the state of cosmic consciousness. Moreover, the description of the wedding of Shiva and Parvati in the concluding part of the novel as well as the reference to Shiva's statement that he always dwells with Parvati are symptomatic of the Tantric worship of the male and the female principles. However, it could be said that these are random references to Tantric thought and have not been assimilated into the texture of the novel. What has actually constituted the bulk of the text is the Indians' deep attachment to their motherland. India is

"bigger than all politics, all economics, all castes, all philosophies."

This assertion coupled with Padmanabha's ambiguous Marxist ideology project the limitations of an Indian committed to Communism. The author presents Communism in a manner that establishes the fact that an Indian carried away by his urge for spirituality cannot be a true Marxist. Kamal immersing his mother's ashes in the holy Indian river and devoutly listening to the tale of Shiva and Parvati are definite indications of the aspiration for spirituality that lies at the core of the Indian psyche. Therefore, Rao has made a sheer mockery of Kirillov's protestations of Communism in this novel to emphasize the message that Marxism offers no solution to the agony and anguish of the Indians vacillating between their deep-rooted spiritual moorings and their adoptive Communist ideologies. The novelist thus holds that it is not material prosperity but spiritual enrichment that brings and ensures happiness to man.

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## The Serpent and the Rope

*The Serpent and the Rope*, written by Raja Rao in 1960, twenty two years after *Kanthapura*, is a novel in which he has chosen to highlight an Indian's quest for truth in his encounter with the West. More precisely, it is a Brahmin groping for an Indian identity. In *Kanthapura* Rao depicts a contemporary Indian reality in which the Hindu hierarchy with its orthodox caste regulations is standing face to face in conflict with the new concept of national solidarity. But twenty two years later one finds Rao hitting upon a plot whereby the hero, an orthodox Brahmin, has sailed with his Indian spirituality to the West. The Indian Brahmin's quest for truth in the midst of Western culture develops into an acute crisis of identity making the theme very serious.

In fact, two themes have been juxtaposed in this novel suggesting a necessary correspondence between the two. These are, on the one hand, the actual situations embodied in human relations and, on the other hand, the hero's research about a particular philosophy of history.

Ramaswamy, the hero, is a South Indian Brahmin and descendant of a medieval Vedantin. He is a research scholar in France married to Madeleine, a French intellectual teaching history. The hero, suffering from consumption, loses his first child who dies of lung complication. Thus, the shadow of death looms large over both Rama and his wife, and, in due course, affects their marital relationship. Rama feels at home only with his stepmother and stepsister in India while his wife, mourning the death of a son, seems "very far." At this point he meets Savithri

Rathore, a north Indian princess, also studying at Cambridge and engaged, much against her wish, to Pratap Singh of the Political Service. Ramaswamy's talk of "Indian values" impresses Savithri while on the other hand Rama, drawn to her, feels the inadequacy of Madeleine.

Two more important characters of this novel who hold our attention are Georges, a devout white Russian convert to Catholicism and Lezo, a Spanish refugee and a socialist with an interest in Buddhism. They are important because it is their various discussions which arouse Madeleine's interest in Buddhism. But Ramaswamy's thesis describes Buddhism as too historical while India belongs to eternity.

Savithri wishes "to know India" from Ramaswamy, who, immediately in his role of **Guru**, finds a spiritual affinity with her. He takes refuge in the undemanding assurance of Savithri's love in Cambridge. Savithri is convinced of his "Indian interpretation of history" seeking to define the Western ethos as moralistic and personal against the Indian as metaphysical and impersonal. Ramaswamy enters into a ritual wedding with her at London which is symbolic of India's victory over Madeleine and the West. Back in France, he finds Madeleine's calm and perpetual sadness intolerable. He, therefore, escapes to India ostensibly to attend the marriage of his stepsister, Saroja. He advises Savithri to marry her fiancé Pratap and makes Saroja marry a person totally unsuitable because he considers the Indian tradition to be "impersonal" above egoistic preferences. He plunges into a brief affair with Lakshmi, a friend's wife, when Savithri gets married to Pratap Singh. He returns to find that Madeleine has become a Buddhist **sadhaka** after the death of her second child. She has adopted the severity of an ascetic path in the quest for transcendence. It is at this juncture that Ramaswamy develops his thesis justifying the ruthless extermination of the pure and noble Cathars by the Roman Catholic Church. He tries to denounce Madeleine's new faith by declaring



that India separates them forever. Just as Buddhism has been "driven out" by Vedanta, Madeleine, too, with her Buddhism, must remain an outsider to Ramaswamy's Vedantic world. As Madeleine resorts to a lonely withdrawal, he goes to England where his consumption flares up and he has to undergo thoracoplasty. He attempts to return to Madeleine but fails and their marriage ends in divorce.

Thereafter, Ramaswamy's loneliness and misery stretch to a point of desperation which is heightened by the fact that his thesis, which is an "Indian" attempt at philosophizing history, is considered deficient in "historical discipline". But, we are also informed that within a short time period – three days as the entries in the diary show– the crisis is resolved upon his submission to a **Guru** as a disciple, and Ramaswamy is freed forever from his anguish.

***The Serpent and the Rope***, a Sahitya Academy Award winner, established Raja Rao as a philosophically complex novelist. It could be called a treatise about man's quest for self-realization. The theme of the novel, as Rao observes, is

"the futility and barrenness of man in human existence when  
man (or woman) has no deep quest, and no thirst for the  
Ultimate. Man's life here in Samsara is an august mission to  
find the Absolute."

This has been highlighted in the very first sentence of the novel as the narrator protagonist, K.R.Ramaswamy, expresses his desire to know the Truth. Born a Brahmin, he should seek Brahman. Conscious of his heritage and having a strong conviction that a Brahmin is devoted to Truth, Ramaswamy expresses his irrepressible quest for God.

"A Brahmin is he who knows **Brahman**,"

is the connotation of true Brahminhood according to Ramaswamy. This is where his quest starts and also ends. Hindu religious thought explains this Brahman to be the Ultimate Reality, the Absolute Consciousness which is beyond time and the world of phenomena. So we find the Brahmin hero's life story starting with a sage as ancestor and ending at the feet of the **Guru** who alone can lead the Brahmin to the true Brahminhood which "commences when you recognize yourself in your eternity."

Ironically we find the Brahmin and Vedantin Ramaswamy who is a pilgrim of eternity to be a historian. His identity thus swings between the opposite modes of time and eternity. Time, for Ramaswamy, is representative of the modern Western existence while eternity that of the Indian ethos. He says,

"There never was time, there never was history, there never was anything but **Shivoham, Shivoham**: I am Shiva, I am the Absolute."

At the same time he knows

"By taste and tradition I am only a historian".

(P.231).

Ramaswamy finds his historical self rooted in the Western mode of Christianity which is opposed to his Vedantin self which finds time to be a perspective of **maya** or the phenomenal world. The Vedantin Ramaswamy holds the Ultimate Reality to be eternal and beyond time. Ramaswamy's tragedy lies in the fact that he aspires towards timelessness which he considers to be his "Hindu" identity, whereas he is actually rooted in historical time.

The story begins with Ramaswamy wishing to attain self realization by pursuing the non-dualistic philosophy of Sankara. He refers to his Upanishadic ancestors like sage Yajnavalkya and other sages who attained Truth. He also refers to the Vedantic classics like the Brahma Sutras and the Upanishads that he has read. These reveal his interest in the Vedantic philosophy that constitutes a

significant part of Indian metaphysical tradition. Ramaswamy's statement, "Seeing oneself is what we always seek" signifies his keenness to pursue the Vedantic path of self-awareness. This belief in the non-dualistic Vedantic philosophy seems to express the novelist's own conviction, as Rao himself says,

"To say that we cannot go back to *Vedanta* is to say that we cannot go back to truth. *Vedanta* is truth."<sup>1</sup>

Critics also maintain that the exposition of Vedanta is the leading theme of *The Serpent and the Rope* though there appear to be other metaphysical strands in the novel.

The non-dualistic philosophy (Advaita) of Sankara holds that the empirical world is phenomenal in its nature. It is the effect of nescience (*avidya*) and hence only an appearance, not a reality. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy talks about Advaita Vedanta but does not appear to have directly followed Sankara's interpretation of the reality and the world. He says,

"The world is either unreal or real – the serpent or the rope.  
There is no in-between-the-two and all that's in between is  
poetry, is sainthood"

(P. 335).

Ramaswamy departs from Sankara's description of the world when he asserts that the "world is either unreal or real." Sankara says,

"What is eternal cannot have a beginning and whatever has a  
beginning is not eternal."<sup>2</sup>

Nor can the world be defined as unreal because the unreal is what does not exist in space, time, etc. The world is, therefore, neither real nor unreal. The nature of the

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1. Asha Kaushik, "Meeting Raja Rao", *The Literary Criterion*, July 1983, p. 38 : (quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao – A Study of His Novels*).
  2. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, II (1923;rpt. London,1971), p. 563 : (quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao – A Study of His Novels*).

world is what Sankara calls "indescribable."<sup>1</sup> However, the world which is not real has its basis in Brahman. Brahman is the substratum of the world just as the rope is the basis of the serpent. Brahman and the world exist as reality and appearance respectively.

Raja Rao's use of the serpent and the rope analogy appears to be based upon the non-dualistic philosophy of Sankara as he states in *Vivekachudamani* :

"The rope is supposed to be the snake only so long as the mistake lasts, and there is no more snake when the illusion has vanished."<sup>2</sup>

It is due to the nescience that the rope appears to be snake. According to Sankara the phenomenal world has no existence of its own; it is only the creation of maya within Brahman itself: :

"Similarly, the whole universe, being the effect of the real Brahman, is in reality nothing but Brahman. Its essence is that, and it does not exist apart from it. He who says it does is still under delusion— he babbles like one asleep."<sup>3</sup>

But Rao's declaration that the "world is either unreal or real" does not seem to be consistent with the non dualistic philosophy of Sankara. However, one does find a similarity between Rao's emphasis on nescience (*avidya*) and Sankara's doctrine of maya. Ramaswamy's observation that we run and lament as we see a serpent (p. 335) echoes Sankara's pronouncement that

"a man may in the dark mistake a piece of rope for a snake and run away from it, frightened and trembling."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, II, p. 564.

2. Swami Madhavananda, trans. *Vivekachudamani of Sri Shankracharya*, Seventh edition (1921: rpt. Calcutta, 1966), pp. 78-79.

3. *Vivekachudamani*, Sloka 230.

4. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, II, p. 58.

The dark symbolises ignorance (**avidya**) and the world is the effect of maya. Rao seems to be in agreement with Sankara that maya conceals the real (rope) and projects the unreal (snake). According to Sankara the world appears to be real because of the deceptive character of maya, called **avidya**. The individual self (**jiva**) bound by **avidya** lives in delusion and considers the gross world to be a reality. Hence Rao maintains that the individuals

"see only with the serpent's eyes"

(P. 335).

Rao, like Sankara, believes that the spiritual preceptor (**Guru**) alone can bestow enlightenment (Vijnana) on the deluded beings. Rao also follows Sankara in his belief that once the path is revealed by the **Guru**, the truth is known and we are no longer deluded by the presence of the appearance, as the snake-like appearance vanishes into the rope.

Rao, we find, considers God to be Brahman enshrined in the non-dualistic philosophy of Sankara. The Advaita Vedanta defines Brahman as existence, consciousness and bliss. Sankara's definition of Brahman is Existence, Knowledge, Infinity and individual bliss.<sup>1</sup> In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy ascribes similar attributes to Brahman :

Not hearing nor tasting nor smelling or seeing,

But form of Consciousness and Bliss :

Shiva I am, I am Shiva.

(P. 114).

Ramaswamy further uses the part-whole theory to describe Brahman. When Georges, a Catholic, states that the whole exists because the part exists, Ramaswamy categorically refutes it calling it a misconception. He declares,

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1. *Vivekachudamani*, Sloka 225.

"When the whole is taken from the whole, what remains is the whole."  
(P. 110).

This pronouncement is based on the description of Brahman in ***Brahad-aranyaka Upanishad*** which says:

"That is full, this is full. From fulness fulness proceeds. If we take away the fulness of fulness, even fulness then remains."<sup>1</sup>

Framing his views on death in accordance with the Upanishads, Ramaswamy says that nobody has died because birth and death are the "illusions of the non-self" (p. 16). His indifference to the fact of his son Pierre's death and also his refusal to mourn the death of his father are entirely philosophic having received the support of the Upanishadic explanation of death. This suggests the tremendous influence of Vedanta on him. In the Upanishads death is meaningless, and so is it in the ***Bhagavad Gita***. In the battle of Mahabharata, when Arjuna gets afflicted with grief and refuses to fight against his kinsmen, Lord Krishna explains to him that Bhishma, Drona and others are not to be identified with the physical bodies of these persons because their Atman is eternal.

When an individual dies, the Atman just changes its garment. ***Srimad Bhagavad Gita*** affirms the indestructibility of the soul. <sup>2</sup> Since the soul is imperishable, birthless and immutable, who ever dies and who slays whom? Guided by these Vedantic precepts, Ramaswamy understands that his son Pierre, his mother Gauri and his father are not really dead because the "self" in them is eternal and imperishable. Upon his father's death he observes that he cannot repent because he does not believe there is death.

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1. ***Brahad-aranyaka Upanishad***, V.1. i. (quoted by P. Dayal in ***Raja Rao— A Study of His Novels***)
  2. ***The Bhagavad Gita***, II. 22.

An important Upanishadic saying, "I am Brahman" forms the nucleus of Sankara's non-dualistic philosophy. It is referred to on numerous occasions in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Sankar affirms the metaphysical identity between the Atman and the *Jiva*. Influenced by the Advaita Vedanta, Rao asserts the identity between the *Jiva* and Brahman, as most of the characters devoutly repeat "Shivoham" in the novel. Numerous utterances in the novel conclude with the invocation of Shiva in the form of "Shivoham" which identifies the individual soul with the Absolute implying that the *Jiva* and Brahman are one. In order to acquire the experience of "Shivoham" by understanding the Self, Ramaswamy undertakes a spiritual odyssey in the novel. The self for him is synonymous with "I" or "Truth" or "Reality". The Self has been assigned different names in the novel such as "Isness, "I" and "Truth".

The highest stage of spiritual experience , according to the Advaitists, is the state of "blissful consciousness". The Advaita Vedanta states that in *anubhava* or "intuition consciousness", the distinctions of the subject and the object are transcended and the truth of the supreme Self is realised. In the metaphysical dialogue with Georges and Madeleine, Ramaswamy conveys his understanding of the spiritual experience:

"In experience, there is no object present.

There is only experience"

"Well, how is that?"

"The sensation must finish its function before knowledge dawns. In knowledge there is no object present — if so, who has knowledge of it? You might say, 'I' And the I has the knowledge of the I through —?"

"Through Knowledge, " said Madeleine. "So Knowledge has knowledge of the I through Knowledge which means knowledge is the I."

"Yes, that is so".

(P. 112).

Ramaswamy emphasizes the idea that in the mystical experience, the subject and the object, the knower and the known are unified. He declares that it is the same pure consciousness that underlies the **Jiva** as also Brahman. When Georges becomes aware of it, he will no longer remain Georges but will become the Truth, the Brahman. Ramaswamy further asserts that the extension of the individual self to the Universal Self (Atman) that exists simultaneously in all human beings is essential for mystical experience. The individual self, which has acquired such awareness, loves all the people alike for the sake of the Self in them. Ramaswamy recapitulates the sage Yajnavalkya's saying that a husband loves his wife not for the sake of his wife but for the sake of the Self in her subsequently followed by his self-searching observation,

"Did Little Mother love the Self in my father? Did I love the Self  
in Madeline?"

(P.24)

This makes the metaphysical implication of "Shivoham" clear that there is no discrimination between individuals, for all men are in reality identical with one another and with Brahman.

The hero, Ramaswamy, sees the immanent Self everywhere. He is so absorbed in the idea of the all-pervading Universal Self that he hears the mystic sound of "Shiva-Shiva, Hara-Hara" even in the running of Indian trains. He makes Little Mother chant, verse after verse, **Manobudhi Ahankara** and "Shivoham". In his philosophical discourse with Savithri, he makes her also aware of the presence of the immanent Atman in all the objects of the world. Savithri, in fact, understands the idea so well that she sings "Mano-budhi Ahankara" with deep emotions and, closing her eyes, enters into meditation. She, therefore, seems to be alive to the significance of "Shivoham." Ramaswamy himself shows a remarkable awareness of the Upanishadic truths, of "Shivoham" in particular.



At the same time that Ramaswamy tries to follow the rigorous path of Vedantism, his character reveals certain human frailties such as sexual morbidity, craze for material advancement and a sense of possessiveness. Feeling frustrated over materialistic failures, he complains against the Indian social structure that hampered his professional advancement. Being awfully conscious of his Indianness, he gets irritated by anything that is not Indian. It is India that has separated him from Madeleine. Since Madeleine is not Indian, she is beyond his understanding. At times he develops prejudice and hatred for his wife who is like a "choking" in his breath. Ramaswamy develops an adulterous relationship with Savithri who gets married with his consent, yet leaves him jealous. He also has a brief adulterous affair with the wife of a captain-friend at Bombay. These human failings could be termed as a Europeanized Brahmin's difficulty in trying to observe Vedantic ascetism.

Staying abroad in France and England for nearly eight years in connection with his research project, his marriage to a French woman and his doctoral investigations involving the study of metaphysical influences on the Albigensians, Ramaswamy begins to appreciate the European cultural tradition. He finds the idea of unbridled mating of young boys and girls in England so very fascinating.

Thus the novel projects a Brahmin's spiritual dilemma between his aspiration for Vedantic ascetism and his desire for freedom in love. The hero's metaphysical quest contrasted with his erotic cravings make his life a pilgrimage of misery and unhappiness. He discovers that he belongs nowhere, having

"no home, no temple, no city, no climate, no age."

( P.402)

A holy vagabond, he feels a sort of vacuum in his life. What is the remedy for this feeling is a question which Ramaswamy himself answers by saying that the solution is not the monkhood of the Sadhu or the worship of a God. He believes

that man is weak in flesh and therefore aspires for freedom in love arguing that those who believe in the "integrity of flesh" lose their freedom.

Ramaswamy's problem is psychical. At the outset, he practices the ascetic *brahmacharya* of his ancestors in the company of his wife Madeline who likes the "untouching Cathars" and loves their celibacy. Suppressing the call of sex can be ascribed partly to the Vedantic influence on him and partly to the sexual frigidity of his counterpart, Madeleine, who is brought up by an unmarried aunt and who wishes to become a Catholic nun. Later, he gets infatuated with his sister, Saroja, and, trying to repress it, develops consequently a psychosomatic disorder. The manifestation of this is his asthmatic consumption. Ramaswamy's pilgrimage is partly also an attempt to find a solution to his erotic tension. We find him referring to Zarathustra's recommendation of consanguineous marriages which serves as a rationale for his own desire for his half-sister, Saroja. He also quotes the ancient Greek custom of advocating brother-and-sister marriages as a mark of aristocracy. We thus find a Europeanized Brahmin seeking support for his incestuous desire from Western legends. The hero criticizes his own Brahminical heritage which prohibits endogamous relationships. He feels aggrieved that the Brahmin, despite his metaphysical wisdom, lacks the courage to defy the outmoded orthodox Indian morality that still holds on to fidelity in love. This criticism reflects his disappointment with his Vedantic ancestors who propounded austerity and sexual containment for self-realization :

"I hated this moral India. True, Indian morality was based on an ultimate metaphysic".

(P. 349).

This is the observation of a Europeanized Ramaswamy whose libido is left blocked due to his separation from Madeleine and his deliberate estrangement from Savithri who, according to his notion of *dharma*, must go back to her

husband, Pratap. Ramaswamy, therefore, oscillates between his spiritual compulsion to observe Vedantic discipline and his desire for erotic freedom.

Suffering from sexual repression, Ramaswamy is seen following the path of Tantra which promises the fulfilment of his carnal desire as well as the attainment of truth. Setting aside Vedantic metaphysics for a time being, he follows the mode of Tantric fulfilment in developing extra-marital relationships. Tantra advocates liberal sexual indulgence for the attainment of truth. However, the impact of Brahminical culture prevents Ramaswamy from abandoning Vedanta. He, therefore, transfigures Vedantic thought into Tantric truths according to the exigencies of his nature. So we find a juxtaposition of Vedanta and Tantra in *The Serpent and the Rope*.

The Tantric elements in *The Serpent and the Rope* are as important as the Vedantic strands woven in the novel. Madeleine's performance of miracles through the exercise of occult power, Ramaswamy's worship of the supreme Goddess and his adoration of the Gods in the aspect of the male and the female principles, the idealization of woman by him, the construction of mandalas by Madeleine, the identity-experience between Ramaswamy and Savithri followed by their quest for androgyny and the concept of *prema* (love) suggest that the novel is, to a large extent, rooted in Tantrism. Madeleine's treatment of dangerous diseases and Ramaswamy's desire for magical accomplishments in the novel are essentially Tantric in nature.

The worship of Shakti, the Mother Goddess, also finds prominence in the novel. Recollecting a verse from Sri Sankara, Ramaswamy describes the Goddess as a tender "creeper of intelligence and bliss". In the company of Little Mother he visits a temple of the Devi and frequently sings hymns in her praise. Decked in her saffron sari with a dark bejewelled forehead, the Devi emanates strength and peace, and Ramaswamy prays for her grace and mercy. We find

one of the hymns addressed to this deity celebrating her physical beauty including her rounded breasts and fragrance-emitting body. (p.26). Ramaswamy's faith in the Goddess is well expressed in his remarks :

"Not Ascension but Assumption is the true nature of the Mother  
of God," (P.361).

Even the coronation of the Queen of England is interpreted by him as the symbol of supremacy of the Goddess.

The Tantric idea of the worship of the male and female deities is also projected in *The Serpent and the Rope*. According to Tibetan Tantrism, the God and the Goddess are worshipped in the aspect of a father - mother relationship which is a method of heightening wisdom or realising "emptiness" or "nirvana"<sup>1</sup>

When Ramaswamy recites a verse from Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* viz.

*"Vak arthah vyava, campruktho,*

Just as word and meaning are binomial

Indeed be Parvathi and Shiva himself"

(P. 186)

one finds a clear corroboration of the afore-mentioned Tibetan Tantric view of God. Ramaswamy's observation,

"Unless the masculine principle absorb the feminine, the world  
cannot be annihilated, and so there can be no joy"

(P. 189)

is also an explanation of "emptiness" through the contemplation of the mother-and-father aspects of God.

Ramaswamy's observation about Shiva and Parvati besporting themselves in Kailash for the joy of mankind, and recalling how Parvati pleads with

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1. Tsong-ka-pa, *Tantra in Tibet* (London, 1977), p. 158– (quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao—A Study of His Novels*)

Shiva for the orphans, beggars and widows to be blessed with the splendour of life conjoined with his song on the eve of Saroja's marriage points to the conjugal union of Gods and Goddesses as also of men and women.

I am He,  
Thou art She,  
I am the Harmony,  
Thou the Words,  
I am the Sky,  
Thou art Earth,  
Let us twain become One,  
Let us bring forth offspring.

(P. 272).

The Brahmin hero also frequently invokes the male and the female deities together :

"To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is  
Sita, to Krishna she is Radha."

(P. 352)

He says that if Parvati had not prayed to Shiva, the God would never have opened his eyes and there would never have been a world. This alludes to the Hindu Tantric thought that Shiva is inseparable from Shakti.

In *The Serpent and the Rope* woman has been exalted and personified as a Goddess. She is considered "the priestess of God" (p. 57). The principal characters in this novel have idealized their beloveds. They are worshipped as forms of Shakti or the Female principle in Hinduism. Savithri, Little Mother and Madeleine are important female characters in the novel symbolizing primordial Shakti. Madeleine is reality while Savithri is a Goddess incarnate because she is described as

"the source of which words were made, the Mother of Sound,  
Akshara-Lakshmi, divinity of the syllable."

(P. 167).

We also find woman epitomizing the "Self" as Ramaswamy himself conveys by quoting sage Yajnavalkya's saying that a husband loves the wife for the sake of the Self in her (p.24). Hence it is the woman in whom man can perceive the all-pervasive self. This exalted concept of woman finds its place in Buddhist Tantric texts where woman is personified as a Goddess. Raja Rao, while upholding this aspect of Buddhism, also makes Ramaswamy denounce Buddhism and the Cathars who disdained woman :

"Buddhism died in India because it became ascetic and so denied womanhood its right to exist. Those who hate woman—who debase woman—must end themselves, as the Cathars did, fasting unto death. Mahatma Gandhi respected women as sisters, not as mates — he too disliked the process of loving and of having children— and so he made them into little men."

(P. 170).

Rao emphasizes the non-dual identity between man and woman. Ramaswamy remarks about man's incompleteness without woman.

"If there were nothing other, you could not know that you are."

(P.170).

He further mentions that man

"Sees himself in woman as essence, the fact of womanhood is  
the meaning of his life."

(P.170).

These remarks point to the identity -experience between man and woman as mentioned in Buddhist Tantrism. Ramaswamy professes to perceive Truth through

his identity with Savithri. As partners in the identity- experience, Ramaswamy and Savithri are exposed to Tantric rituals and their relationship results in the revelation of truths. Following the Tantric precept of man developing his spirituality by regarding woman as a Goddess, Ramaswamy regards Savithri to be the "Akshara-Lakshmi" and "divinity of the syllable" (p. 167). Savithri, too, acquires wisdom in Ramaswamy's company. The narrator says that she has absorbed "Time" as Shiva had absorbed poison.

We find mention of Buddhist Tantric mandalas in the novel. Ramaswamy expresses his desire to sit in meditation, draw the *swastika* on the wall, decorate the sanctuary with mandalas, light the sacrificial hearth and walk round Agni (fire) which symbolizes the metaphysical knowledge that burns ignorance.

Madeleine in the beginning declares herself to be a Buddhist. Later she designs Tantric mandalas to seek illumination of the soul. She decorates her house with lamps and mandalas and one finds burning incense everywhere. She takes vows of "moderate silence", makes many mandalas, sits in meditation amongst them and invokes Madonna to cure dangerous diseases (p. 322). She thus follows Buddhist Tantrism for seeking the truth. The reader, at this point, is reminded of the fact that Madeleine began with the compassion of a Buddhist though she ends up with Tantric *chakras* and mandalas.

Savithri, too, shows her readiness for meditation or entrance into a mandala as she often closes her eyes, grows absent-minded and relapses into silence. Mandala, in terms of Tantra, is regarded as a symbol of illumination. Therefore, Savithri's meditation upon the mandala may be interpreted as the attempt of a Tantric *yogini* to realise spiritual bliss.

Several characters in the novel such as Little Mother, Madeleine, Ramaswamy and Savithri try to enter the state of "no-mind" which forms the nucleus of Tantric *sadhana*, and signifies the expansion of the mind to acquire

freedom and ultimate joy. Rao describes as essential the state of "no-mind" for perceiving the truth known as "isness" in Tantra. He upholds "isness" as Truth which he believes is synonymous with "I" or "bliss"<sup>1</sup>. Ramaswamy and Savithri, in one of their metaphysical dialogues, conclude that "isness" is the Truth :

"Therefore, what is Truth?" I asked.....

"Isness is the Truth", she answered.

(P. 130).

The narrator thinks that Savithri has reached the transcendental plane and developed an understanding of Truth.

Ramaswamy perceives Truth in the union of man and woman :

"We lie by each other, clasped in each other's arms, breathing  
each other, sucking each other, as though Truth was in the  
instant of that conjunction."

(P. 230)

But he believes that only the Benaras- born bride is desirable for absorption into man. This observation is made only in relation to Saroja and Savithri in the novel, for they alone are inclined to become Benaras-born brides. Critics like C.D. Narasimhaiah interpret the Ramaswamy-Savithri relationship in the light of the remark, "all brides be Benaras-born," describing it as being Vedantic in import. Narasimhaiah argues that

"Savithri's love for Ramaswamy bears witness to the  
affirmation of the self, the Absolute."<sup>1</sup>

The description of Saroja's beauty by Ramaswamy arouses "something of the Ganges and the Jumna" in his very being and ends with his remark :

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<sup>1</sup>. C.D. Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao*, p. 113.



"Benaras was indeed nowhere but inside oneself : '*Kashi kshetram, shariram tribhuvana jananim.*' And I knew :  
all brides be Benaras born,"

(P. 50).

Varanasi also represents Shiva's third eye which is located in the *bhrumadhya-ksetra*. Most of the time Shiva sits in meditative contemplation with his senses drawn inward and dwells in *atmajyoti* (self-illumination).

Therefore, those who habitually live in contemplation and strive for the junction of the three *nadis* by yogic exercise and Vedantic ascetism, attain union with the Supreme in *brahmarandhra*.

Benaras, in *The Serpent and the Rope* signifies eternity. Rao proclaims that salvation is the privelege of man alone, and woman can attain liberation only by pleasing her husband in body, mind and word. Ramaswamy says that

"for a woman the sacred feet of her husband be Paradise"

(P. 294).

He affirms that man leads woman to the altar of God. He proclaims man to be eternal. So he believes that the women who are Benaras-born become immortal through their self-effacement and absorption into men. The Benaras-born brides are as courageous as Iseult who physically dies in order to make her lover Tristan live eternally. Iseult, however, becomes eternal through her absorption into Tristan. The reference to Benaras-born brides could denote freedom in love as experienced by the concubines of Benaras who have risen above social and moral inhibitions and are free to love. The *gopis*, too, loved Krishna beyond social constraints as their love for him was true and eternal. This kind of freedom in love has been repeatedly emphasized in the novel. Ramaswamy remarks :

"To be free is to know one is free, beyond the body and beyond  
the mind; to love is to know one is love; to be pure is to know

one is purity. Impurity is in action and reaction: what is born  
must die, what has form must vanish and stink."

(P. 382).

Raja Rao believes in the freedom and purity of man's own thinking. For him, bodily sins are no sins as the body is perishable. Radha, who suddenly becomes possessive of Krishna, is told by him that neither the body nor the mind acts as a husband. Love goes beyond the body and the mind. The love between Ramaswamy and Savithri calls for such a growth and understanding. Savithri may marry Pratap but she will continue to act as *gopi* to her Krishna (Ramaswamy), hence all brides be Benaras-born. The hero, thus, seeks immortality through the love of a Benaras-born bride which he finds in Savithri. His extra-marital relationship with her proves that love does not develop in a loveless conventional matrimony, for "marriage is a bond," (p. 143). The marriage of Madeleine and Ramaswamy ends in an uncereemonial separation of the two. Saroja is extremely unhappy with the bridegroom Little Mother has chosen for her. Nor will Pratap and Savithri be happy in marriage. Nor has Uncle Charles been successful with his marriages. Tante Zoubie ironically calls the institution of marriage a matter of convenience. Ramaswamy mocks at men and women seeking single-hearted fidelity in marital love. He contemptuously calls them "bourgeois."

Rao's hero is vehemently against the institution of marriage. Rao believes loveless conventional marriages to be uncongenial to the growth of love. That is why most of the married couples in *The Serpent and the Rope* are unhappy. According to Rao, natural living is emblematic of purity. Ramaswamy says that those who live naturally are pure in heart. In his opinion, man is polygamous by nature, so one can never be a "Cathar," a pure; one has to be "purity." (p. 99). Savithri possesses natural purity, for she lives a natural life and transforms every experience into a divine situation.

"Savithri gave one the sense that, do what you would, you could only *be*, and since you could only *be*, nothing could happen to you."

(P.128)

Like the legendary love of Radha and Krishna, Rao expounds *prema* (love) in the *The Serpent and the Rope*, seasoning, of course, his view of love with sensuality. Rama and Savithri are not involved in a platonic relationship, for he often holds her in his arms, presses her against him and touches her lips as though they were filled with honey.

Ramaswamy's reference to the worship of a naked woman has Tantric intimations. He recollects one of his Tantric ancestors, associated with sixteen initiated companions, worshipping a naked concubine :

.....And the girl herself stepped forward, singing:

I have no body, I have no mind,

I am the essence of creation....

(P.172).

The naked virgin's *mantra*, "I have no body, I have no mind," in the novel is a refrain of naked woman- *prakriti* because a nude maiden is considered a Goddess in Tantrism.

However, the Tantric ritual with a woman is performed under the supervision of a *Guru* (spiritual preceptor). Ramaswamy, too, is in search of a *Guru*. His utterance that he will not return and he has

"gone from whence there is no returning"

followed by his conclusion that the *Guru* is synonymous with the truth (p.405), conforms to the Tantric precept of a disciple uniting with the Brahman the moment he receives initiation by a *Guru*.

Ramaswamy ends his search for Truth by confessing that had he been less of a Brahmin, he might have known more of love. (p.400). His desire for sensual pleasures becomes evident when he says it will be wondrous to :

"have a cup of warm milk, and the beauty of Rukmini's young  
body beside one.

It smells of musk and of the nests of birds".

(P.149).

He also proclaims :

"I shall never be a Brahmin... Something hypostatic calls me.

Mother mine, I will go."

(P.149).

Ramaswamy's desire to enjoy the vivacious Rukmini casting away his Brahminic robe, followed by his invocation to the Mother Goddess, reveal more of Tantra than Vedanta in him. The South Indian Brahmin who began with the conviction, "Brahmin is he who knows Brahman" (p.5), in the end regrets having been one. The novel thus depicts the predicament of a man, who lured by the worldly pleasures, finds it hard to observe the severe austerity and spiritual discipline of Vedanta. The novelist suggests an alternative path to Vedanta when he says that Truth can be sought by following the Tantric discipline under the supervision and guidance of a **Guru**.

Throughout the novel we find the protagonist, in his exile, longing for a home, longing for India.

"Where, I ask you, where was I to build a house, a home?"

he says and again,

"I must have a home, must get back home."

There is an intense feeling of rootlessness in which he identifies home with his mother who has been dead. He longs for India as a home :

"I would go back to India, for that India was my breath, my only  
sweetness, gentle and wise, *she was my mother.*"

(P. 376)

At the end of his encounters, Ramaswamy exclaims :

"There is nobody to go to now : no home, no temple, no city, no  
climate, no age."

(P. 402).

One comes across a tremendous nostalgia breaking through again and again in the novel whereby Ramaswamy glorifies his ancient lineage in an ancient civilization. This itself proves that somewhere deep in his thoughts has crept the feeling that he can never return home. "Home," identified with India, becomes something abstract which he wishes to carry with him wherever he goes. He says that he can carry the "metaphysic" of India within him:

"I was born an exile and could continue to be one. My India I  
carried wheresoever I went."

(P.376)

The Brahmin desperately tries to cling to his Brahminic tradition :

I found myself saying the Gayathri mantra as we landed at  
Santa Cruz. I had said it day after day, almost for twenty years;  
I must have said it a million, million times :  
(OM) O face of Truth with a disk of gold, remove the mist (of  
ignorance) that I may see you face to face."

(P.246)

He attempts to be so very Brahminic secure in his tradition, for the recitation of the **Gayatri** is the exclusive privilege of the Brahmin constituting the very symbol of Brahminhood.

Ramaswamy sometimes muses on the typical life that a Brahmin has been assigned by the age-old Hindu tradition. He ponders upon his role as a premier Brahmin of his village, studying the ancient texts in Sanskrit, reading the Ramayana for the benefit of the villagers, earning fees and feasts at various rituals, and remaining satisfied with a docile Rukmini or Kaumudi in kitchen and in bed. But, then, he is thrown out of this wistful reverie with the realization that this kind of a life is not meant for him. A force stronger than the whole strength of an ancient tradition has stirred him and he exclaims :

"Something hypostatic calls me. Mother mine, I will go."

(P.149)

At one point, the hero firmly declares :

"The one cannot be many, but the many can be one,"

(P.383)

"thereby rejecting Madeleine's "dualistic" Buddhism. According to him, the only reality is the Absolute. "The meaning of life," says Rao himself, "reveals when the duality resolves into non-duality."<sup>1</sup>

Sorrow forms the background of the novel. A major cause of this is Ramaswamy's relationship with women, none of which is satisfying or fulfilling. In trying to portray the hero's progress towards his true Indian identity, Rao has chosen this aspect to specifically reveal the Indian ethos as traditional and classical contrasted with the Western as romantic and historical. Rao projects the Indian assumption of man being ever lonely. He further declares the spiritual recognition of the non-duality of self or Atman of the Vedanta philosophy to be reserved exclusively for the male :

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<sup>1</sup>. "Face to Face with Raja Rao" by S.V.V., Bombay : *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, Jan.,5,1965, pp. 44-45 (quoted by Esha Dey in *The Novels of Raja Rao*)

"Eternity is only for men...., women will die at the opportune time."

(P.139)

It follows, therefore, that neither Madeleine, rejected as wife nor Savithri, extolled as beloved, can be companion on the hero's path to the Absolute. Ramaswamy, through his encounters with women, realizes that these relationships are futile attempts in his search for the Truth, and his quest ultimately must end at the feet of a *Guru*.

One may also wonder why the theme of an intellectual thesis has been incorporated into the narrative structure of the novel. Ramaswamy believes that there can be only two attitudes towards the world, one Vedantic and the other materialistic. The Vedantic attitude identifies the Absolute Consciousness or *Brahman* as the Ultimate Reality and the empirical world as a mere appearance imposed on that Reality. The opposite is the Western "materialistic" view culminating in Marxism and stating that the empirical world is the only reality. Ramaswamy believes there to be no compromise between these two opposite views. Applying this subjective formula to history, Ramaswamy finds Absolute Consciousness to be symbolically manifested in the human organisation of orthodoxy. Like the Absolute Consciousness, he says, Orthodoxy also is impersonal. All deviations from orthodoxy are personal rebellions and must be justly treated as heresies. So he justifies in his historical thesis the ruthless extermination of the Cathars, whom he calls heretics, by the orthodox Roman Catholic Church.

Since the Absolute is non-dual (*advaita*), a belief in dualistic philosophy amounts to heresy. Madeleine's Buddhism appears to Ramaswamy an acceptance of the existence of the world as real. Hence, being dualistic, it runs counter to the non-dual belief of the husband. He equates the Buddhist order with Buddhism and Vedanta with Hinduism and comes to the conclusion that just as the orthodox Catholic Church has crushed heresies, so has Vedanta crushed Buddhism. Therefore, it is justifiable for a Hindu Vedantin husband like himself to

drive out from his life a Buddhist (and hence heretic) wife. Savithri, for him, is the "true woman" because she believes in his historical equations and submits totally to his metaphysics of the impersonal. She accepts the human condition which is *dharma* according to Ramaswamy.

No less important is Rao's portrayal of Hindu elements in the novel.

"Rao builds up the Hindu atmosphere masterfully with a host of suggestions, images and associations : bells ringing, holy cows wandering, sonorous Sanskrit verses rendered sensitively in English, references to ancient rituals – the sandalwood-coconut -and-camphor syndrome so favoured by Rao."<sup>1</sup>

He takes Ramaswamy to Benaras. In this Eternal City we never know "where reality starts and where illusion ends":

In Benaras there be many dead, and all the dead of all the ages, the successive generations of manes after manes after manes, have accumulated in the sky. And you could almost see them layer on layer on the night of moon eclipse, fair and pale and tall and decrepit, fathers great grandfathers.....

(P.10)

While he is striving towards transcendence, he is also recognizing his bondage to the phenomenal world, being fully aware that in the same Benaras only fifty rupees make the sacred Brahmin happy. On "these very banks" of the Ganges, he feels the presence of his Upanishadic ancestors along with the crocodiles and fragments of half-burnt bodies floating down the holy river.

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1. N.S.Gour, *Raja Rao's Metaphysical Trilogy*, p. 11.



Again in presenting Ramaswamy's relation with his father, Rao has pointed to Hindu orthodoxy following a definite code of conduct regulating the relation between father and son where the father becomes equivalent to "heaven, to ***dharma***, to supreme discipline and to satisfy father is to please all Gods." But , unfortunately, the hero discovers after his father's death that he did not love him when he was alive. He says,

"I have little to tell you of my father's death except that I did not love him."

He then continues,

"but that after he died, I knew him and loved him. I cannot repent, as I do not know what repentance is. For I must first believe there is death. And that is the central fact – I do not believe that death is. So, for whom shall <sup>I</sup> repent?"

(P.9)

This is the Vedantic concept of death being illusory and seems to have been used to justify Ramaswamy's attitude towards his father. He further continues :

"Of course, I love my father now..... Left to myself, I become alone and full of love. When one is alone one always loves. In fact it is because one loves, and one is alone, one does not die."

(P.9)

Hence we find Ramaswamy 's love for his dead father linked up with his Indian or Vedantic metaphysic which is far more important than his failure as a Hindu son in real life.

It is interesting to note that the Buddhism of Gautama seems to be driven out by Ramaswamy's Advaita, yet his own situation is similar to that of the

Buddha. Like the Buddha he, too, is seeking that "from which there is no returning." He says,

"There must be a way out, Lord, a way out of this circle of life."

(P. 234)

The Buddha's path of renunciation haunts him through all his encounters with women. Remembering the Buddha's renunciation, he leaves the bed of Lakshmi. He realizes that the path to the Absolute is lonely.

The search for this path which, according to Ramaswamy, is the ultimate and the only truth, is contained in the opening sentence of the novel where he says, "I was born a Brahmin – that is devoted to truth." That in his quest for truth he will end up at the feet of a **Guru** seems inevitable even at the beginning of the story where he says that he is devoted to truth. Even at the very start one gets prepared for a progression of events which will lead the hero to devote himself ultimately to the search for that Truth which, he finds, only a **Guru** can lead him to. Thus, the end may be said to have a hint even at the beginning. The novel begins with a philosophic commitment. Thereafter, the sequence of events that develop, find themselves hemmed in by a series of meditations, fantasies and introspections, thereby unfolding the hero's evolving insights. The novel follows a meditational style and the events recorded are often in the form of wistful musings.

Rao has made his hero Ramaswamy a historian and a hyper-intellectual who is trying to find out the Truth by interpreting the various religious systems. But

"When Truth is juggled so fluently, so pedantically, it acquires a shadow of *avidya*— something which Rama cannot realize until the close of the novel."<sup>1</sup>

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1. N.S.Gour, *Raja Rao's Metaphysical Trilogy*, p. 83.

Rao demonstrates how the hero gets caught in his own intellectual cobweb and suffers defeat upon the breakdown of the intellectual process. The natural corollary that evolves is the hero's casting aside intellection in favour of submission to a **Guru** (spiritual preceptor) as he realizes that Truth cannot be discovered without the guidance of the **Guru**. So, in the end, self-debates and intellect take a back-seat while devotion reigns supreme proving, therefore, that man constantly fails to understand the real nature of things by means of intellectual thought - systems.

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## The Cat and Shakespeare

*The Cat and Shakespeare*, written in 1965, takes up the theme of the metaphysical quest left unresolved in *The Serpent and the Rope* and carries the reader a step further in the spiritual journey of Rao's hero. This novel contains a subtle interplay of the comic and the serious which, together with the juxtaposition of diverse elements, builds up an atmosphere wherein the hero appears to be more restful and at peace with himself contrary to the hero in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Rao gives the following explanation for this work :

It is a metaphysical comedy, and all I would want the reader to do is to weep at every page, not for what he sees, but for what he sees he sees. For me it is like a book of prayer.<sup>1</sup>

One does not find in *The Cat and Shakespeare* a story narrated systematically with a chronological sequence of events. But that is not so important as the author seems more bent upon communicating to the reader the symbolic significance of the various actions and relationships. Though apparently one comes across a series of "non-happenings," the underlying message is that of a mood of contentment and tranquility devoid of any intellectual pretensions. This itself marks a progress in the spiritual journey of Rao's hero. The spiritual discontent one comes across in *The Serpent and the Rope* is nowhere to be found in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. The mode of presentation here is more symbolic than realistic. As it is "a metaphysical comedy," symbols control the total

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1. Raja Rao, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (New York, 1965).

form. Ramakrishna Pai is the narrator-hero. He is a man of mediocrity engaged in mundane activities and having no high aspirations. He says :

"I have a small white house here, with a courtyard. From the back I look over coconut trees and huts and somewhere there's the sound of the sea."

(P. 5)

He appears to be happy and contented in his ordinary surroundings. He too is in search of spiritual upliftment like Ramaswamy of *The Serpent and the Rope* but, unlike Ramaswamy, he does not have to undergo intellectual and emotional stresses and conflicts before deciding to seek out a **Guru**. Pai easily finds a **Guru** in Govindan Nair and willingly entrusts himself to the guidance of Nair's philosophy. There is no trace of egoism or intellectual conflict or any formal reasoning to be found in Pai. Rao seems to have deliberately cast aside logic and rationality while writing out this novel.

"I have a system of no logic and that is the story,"

confesses Pai. Very little of the story can be comprehended. The dialogues, though having a philosophic content, appear to be mirthful, illogical and unconventional. Sportive and whimsical as the storyline is, one gets acquainted with a deep mysticism latent in the celebration of everything.

Prominent among other things is the image of the cat as a Goddess. Here it needs to be mentioned that critics such as C.D. Narasimhaiah and M.K. Naik have analysed this work in the Vedantic light. They find in it the working of Vedantic metaphysics and come out with their own interpretations.

Narasimhaiah finds in this novel traces of ego, illusion and three gunas as mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*<sup>1</sup>. Naik, on the other hand, has discovered in it

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1 C.D. Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* (N.Delhi, nd.), pp. 157-160.

the non-dualistic philosophy of Ramanuja. The cat-kitten theory expounded in *The Cat and Shakespeare* has been interpreted by Naik as symbolizing the doctrine of *prapatti* or self-surrender as explained in *Visishtadvaita* or the modified non-dualistic philosophy of Ramanuja (AD. 1017-1137) which forms a part of Vedanta. Ramanuja's doctrine of *prapatti* preaches self-surrender (Bhakti Yoga) for the realization of God. It states that the right way to salvation is through a complete resignation to faith and a total surrender of oneself as a kitten that finds itself secure in the mouth of the mother cat.

Govindan Nair, the prime mover of action, recommends the way of the kitten as the way to salvation. As his colleague, John, explains to his boss, Bhootalinga Iyer :

"Govindan Nair always talks of a mother-cat. It carries the kitten by the scruff of its neck. That is why he is so carefree. He says, 'Learn the way of the kitten. Then you're saved. Allow the mother-cat, Sir, to carry you.'"

(P . 66)

A real cat is, infact, brought by John in a rat-trap and put on Nair's table as a joke. Nair does not object to this but rather starts a discourse on the importance of the cat in ancient civilizations and its philosophic significance as a symbol. The hilarious situation, arising out of Nair's Shakespearean soliloquy in the manner of Hamlet, the play-acting by the fellow clerks of the ration office and most of all by John and Syed Sahib kneeling humbly before the cat, comes to an end with the cat alighting on Bhootalinga Iyer's head and causing his sudden death. Iyer has a religious apathy to cats and dies unexpectedly as he finds it too shocking that the cat should perch on his head. This appears somewhat improbable to the reader who has yet to witness the final court scene with its

unusual proceedings. Nair fabricates a story, implicates the late Bhootalinga Iyer and tries to confuse the judge with philosophical paradoxes. Finally, he produces the cat which, sitting behind the record clerk's chair and licking his neck, helps him in suddenly discovering the relevant file. A quick turn of action takes place leading to the discovery of Bhootalinga Iyer's signature upon Nair's which proves Nair's innocence to all who are present. In this way the real cat, though an ill-omen for Bhootalinga Iyer, proves auspicious for Nair. Symbolically it may be said that the mother cat has protected her kitten (Nair). So, the cat figures both realistically and symbolically.

The Cat motif, being the most prominent one, derived from Ramanuja's *Visishtadvaitic* philosophy, marks a significant advance over Rao's stance in *The Serpent and the Rope* where he seems to be wholly influenced by the philosophy of Sankara.

Ramanuja differed from Sankara in his concept of the Absolute. The Cat symbolizes his idea of Brahman or the Divine that is compassionate. This is Ramanuja's theism against the intellectualism of Sankara which was found by some thinkers to be emotionally insufficient.

Radhakrishnan states :

"Philosophy has its roots in man's practical needs. If a system of thought cannot justify fundamental human instincts and interpret the deeper spirit of religion it cannot meet with general acceptance."<sup>1</sup>

One confronts a crisis at the end of *The Serpent and the Rope* where the hero, Ramaswamy, is driven to despair. This simply shows the inevitable failure of the intellectual being in trying to grapple with the fundamental truth about life.

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1. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 659..

Rao's concept of the Ultimate seems to have undergone a dramatic change. After the unresolved conflicts in *The Serpent and the Rope*, he has now opted for Ramanuja's *Visishtadvaita* school of thought. *The Cat and Shakespeare* sees the emergence of Rao with a more matured philosophy. He has switched over from the *Nirguna* to the *Saguna* which is the form of Ramanuja's Brahman. This Absolute or God has qualities which can be imagined and grasped by the mind. The *Saguna Brahman* contains the essence of perfect love and mercy. The individual *Jiva* stands out by its own quality. It does not get absorbed into the Absolute. Ramanuja further states that it is difficult to define the relation between the *Jiva* and God. Through various metaphors Ramanuja explains the various modes of relationship. According to him, the soul, which is precious to God, is related to God in the same way as the part to the whole, as the body to the soul and as the subject to its lord.

Radhakrishnan clarifies the concept of Brahman upheld by Ramanuja in these words :

"Brahman has internal difference and..... is a synthetic whole, with souls and matter as his moments..... The qualities of being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ananda*) give to Brahman a character and a personality... He is all-knowing and has direct intuition of all. Brahman is the supreme personality, while the individuals are personal in an imperfect way. Personality implies the ability to plan and realize one's purposes. God is perfect personality, since He contains all experience within Himself and is dependent on nothing external to him."<sup>1</sup>

N.S. Gour states :

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1. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 683.



"Such an Absolute is significantly different from Sankara's Absolute, which, according to Ramanuja, is a blank, unknowable by any means, perception, inference or scripture. The *Jiva* confronts Brahman, according to Ramanuja, in a personal communion, a real fellowship with an 'other', divine personality."<sup>1</sup>

To quote Radhakrishnan :

"As a theist, Ramanuja believes that salvation is possible, not through *Jnana* and *Karma*, but through *Bhakti* and *Prasada* (grace). The soul that realizes God is liberated from the body forever. But even for liberation the soul's efforts alone are not enough. God helps the devotee to attain perfect knowledge and chooses whomsoever he will for *moksha*. God lifts from bondage and misery the creature who flings himself at His mercy and constantly remembers Him as the only object of love. Such complete self-surrender is called *prapatti*. Freed from ignorance and bondage, the liberated soul retains its individuality but enjoys, in perfect love and wisdom, infinite joy born of complete communion with God."<sup>2</sup>

About the theory of *prapatti* Radhakrishnan writes :

"Prapatti is complete resignation to God, and is, according to the Bhagvatas, the most effective means for gaining salvation. It is open to all, the learned as well as the ignorant, the high as well as the low..... anyone, after taking instruction

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1. N.S. Gour, *Raja Rao's Metaphysical Trilogy*, p. 154.

2. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 703.

from a preceptor, may fling himself, on the bosom of God and  
take refuge in him....."<sup>1</sup>

There are two schools of thought which give their own views regarding *prapatti*. The Northern school (Vadagalais) held *prapatti* to be one of the four ways of achieving union with God, the others being *Karma*, *Jnana* and *Bhakti*. It emphasizes human effort as an essential factor in attaining salvation. This school formulated the theory of *Markatnyaya* whereby the young monkey must make effort and cling to its mother. Similarly the soul must strive eternally for attaining salvation and union with the Absolute.

The Southern school (Tengalais) upheld the *Marjaranyaya* or the Cat theory by which it believed that man's effort alone was insufficient for achieving something. The individual, loved by God, is the one who is selected by Him for bestowing His grace. Therefore, it is such a one who attains salvation and does not have to make a strained effort. That particular *Jiva* is like the kitten that entrusts itself to the care of the mother-cat and is carried safely from place to place without having to fear or worry. That *Jiva* is, thus, cared for by the Divine being who treats him with compassion.

In the present novel Rao has followed the *Marjaranyaya* theory when ascribing to the cat an allegorical entity. One finds Govindan Nair keeping himself free from cares and conflicts and celebrating his worldly existence. He does not choose to steer the course of events or the course of his own life consciously. He rather commits his soul to the benevolent care of his Supreme Creator. He believes that like the kitten that matters so much to the mother-cat, the individual human soul, which resigns itself to the care of the Almighty, also matters so much to him. Shantha, too, follows the same line of thought when she displays a sense of complete fulfilment and security in her selfless love for Pai. She is devoid of any

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1. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 705.

worry or anxiety despite her extramarital relationship with Pai which is socially unacceptable. She seems to have totally resigned herself to the loving care of Pai and has, therefore, no cause to panic at all.

The Cat-kitten theory is reinforced when Rao makes Pai see the concrete vision of the feeble kittens walking on the garden wall oblivious of the danger of falling. This reality gets translated into a spiritual vision and Pai seems to get enlightened by the idea that he is as safe as these kittens on the wall. He feels that, relying on the care and compassion of the Divinity, he need not fear at all. He accepts Nair as a **Guru** who points out to him the path to salvation which is an effortless and complete resignation to faith just like the kitten carried securely in the mouth of the mother-cat. Nair advocates the way of the kitten as the way to obtain Divine grace.

The real cat in the novel is not an ordinary cat as it can discriminate. It feeds on white cow's milk, and it refuses to partake of the milk if the saucer containing milk happens to be touched by Shantha during her menstruation period. It does not get angry with Pai even if he provokes it nor does it bite anyone in the house. Mysterious are its ways and it thus symbolises the Divine Goddess in this work.

***The Cat and Shakespeare*** has also to be studied from the Tantric point of view. Various motifs in the novel show that Tantric thought has been interwoven into the text. Tantric miracles are alluded to in this work. For instance, in his first meeting, Govindan Nair tells Ramakrishna Pai about sadhus who appease their hunger with three pinches of sand. By reciting a **mantra** they can go without food for three months. Nair calls himself such a sadhu "dispensing numbers" and giving "magical cards" which shows his acquaintance with Tantrism. Pai also refers to Tantric miracles performed by an old lady who is the grandmother of Mudali's wife. These incidents relate to **Vamamarga Tantra** which mentions the practice of sorcery and witchcraft.

There are instances in the novel where the male and female deities are invoked together. Pai recalls the tribesman saying that there is a "secret trysting place" of the Goddess with her Lord Shiva. Govindan Nair also observes that Shiva dwells with Mother Bhavani. The invocation of the God and Goddess together is a characteristic feature of Tantra. The association of *purusa* and *prakriti* is of great importance, according to Tantra, as it leads to creation.<sup>1</sup>

The author portrays woman as the positive force in man's life. Shantha is the embodiment of the varied aspects of womanhood. She is simultaneously a wife, mother and Goddess. This representation of woman is in accordance with the Tantric faith which worships woman as the earthly representative of Shakti or the supreme Goddess. Shantha speaks in puzzles and justifies the fact that woman is a great mystery. Tantrism too holds this view of woman as being mysterious. Pai thinks pregnant women to be extremely beautiful and feels excited about Shantha's four-month pregnancy which is expressive of his Tantric belief that pregnant women are holy because they have "second sight."

The male affinity with the female and the dependence of one on the other is depicted by Rao through the non-dualistic affinity between Pai and Shantha. He chooses to highlight man-woman relationship in the light of man realizing his identity only through his relationship with woman. Shantha's assertion : "I say you. And you say I," (p. 83) is suggestive of the intellectual affinity between Pai and Shantha as lovers. This kind of a non-dualistic affinity between the lovers is mentioned in the *jnanamudra* experience of Buddhist Tantrism, which regards woman as a Goddess. By interacting with the woman, man realizes his spiritual essence or "Being." Shantha symbolises Shakti or the Female principle.

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1. Arthur Avalon trans. *The Great Liberation : Maha Nirvana Tantra*, p. 82, (quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao – A Study of His Novels*).

Ramakrishna Pai has an identity - experience with her which enables him to realize his spiritual essence. He declares :

"What belongs to you belongs to me, what belongs to the lord  
alone belongs... Lord, how beautiful thou hast made woman!"

(P. 32)

Rao also upholds the view that man leads and woman follows him on the path to salvation. In worshipping her man, woman finds her recognition and fulfilment. To project this Tantric idea in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Rao makes Pai observe :

"To be a wife is to worship your man."

(P.30)

He further remarks :

"My feet were there for her to worship; My weaknesses were  
there for her to learn; my manhood.... for her to bear children"

(P.23).

This is a Tantric view which reinforces the theory of the *Mahanirvana Tantra* that a woman, pleasing her husband, attains the abode of Brahman.<sup>1</sup>

In both *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Rao appears to be a strong critic of conventional marriage, which he finds to be loveless and unhappy. In the present novel, Ramakrishna Pai and his wife, Saroja, are unhappy because there is a lack of intellectual affinity between them. Saroja is materialistic and keeps happy with her coconut fields and Pai finds it difficult to relate to her spiritually. On flimsy grounds he leaves her and enters into

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1. Arthur Avalon, *The Great Liberation*, p. 221 (quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao— A Study of His Novels*).

an illicit relationship with Shantha who is a school teacher. He does not feel guilty of this socially unacceptable liaison but rather highlights it saying,

"To be a wife is not to be wed. To be a wife is to worship your man."

(P. 30)

He does not believe in marriage as a social sanction for a man-woman relationship. He considers true marriage to be the consummation and, therefore, procreation of children. This attitude of Pai is in keeping with the precepts of *Vamamarga Tantra* which states that truth cannot be attained by observing ascetic rigour because man is inevitably vulnerable to sex. He

"must be taught to rise by means of those very things which are the cause of his fall. As one falls on the ground, one must lift oneself by the aid of ground."<sup>1</sup>

*Samputa Tantra* also states that desire is to be consumed by desire.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is sensuality, according to Tantric thought, which leads to spirituality. Ramakrishna Pai's extramarital relationship with Shantha can be interpreted in the light of Tantrism because he gets cured of his ailment as soon as he develops a relationship with Shantha who is the epitome of ideal womanhood. She is, therefore, the perfect Tantric companion of Pai and the means of his liberation. Thus, Rao highlights the Tantric belief that *moksha* (liberation) may be attained through *bhoga* (worldly pleasures). Pai's relationship with Shantha is an example of unconventional love which, in Tantric terms, is called *prema*. Pai's relationship with his wife blocks his libido that leads to his illness. But Shantha's love

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1. Sir John Woodroffe, *Sakti and Sakta* (Madras, 1975), p. 403 (quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao – A Study of His Novels*).

2. Tsong-ka-pa, *Tantra in Tibet*, p. 161 (quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao – A Study of His Novels* ).

immediately cures him. He is rapturous over Shantha's pregnancy and celebrates her motherhood. This portrays the profound depth of the illicit liaison between Pai and Shantha which does not care for social or religious sanction but, rather, develops into a physical and spiritual richness which is more enduring than any form of conventionality.

The *prema* or love that is described in this work is adulterous according to our social norms but regarded by Tantrists as exemplary because it is like the love between Radha and Krishna. Man and woman, like Krishna and Radha, can acquire infinite love if they follow the path of unconventional love. These various concepts of Tantrism which find mention in *The Cat and Shakespeare* make it a book of Tantric prayer.

The novel also delineates the Tantric idea of androgyny. Pai remarks :

"How can two not seek the not-two? Find this secret and you  
need no gold to seek happiness."

(P.81)

This is expressive of his wish to be both male and female. He further mentions :

"I love Shantha because she has my child in her. That is the  
secret. She has myself in her."

(P. 82)

Shantha, too, expresses her desire for androgyny when she says that she loves herself by loving Pai. Shantha is an extraordinary woman who has transcended social and moral inhibitions. So she is able to realize her androgyny.

The Tantric idea of "no-mind" is illustrated through various characters in the novel who try to achieve this condition of the mind which, they believe, leads to happiness. Pai, not wanting to be bound by any agitating thought, observes that he cares for nothing and worships nothing. He says,

"Caring for oneself is to give things their self."

(P.23).

Nair also states :

"The mind that is not ... is happiness."

(P.84).

He admires the tribesman's attitude to life which shows that he has attained the state of "no-mind". Rao has used the tale of a tribesman walking fearlessly through the forest abounding in tigers and panthers. In the midst of the danger of being attacked by wild animals, the tribesman stands fearlessly contemplating the God and the Goddess, Shiva and Parvati. This absence of fear, according to Rao, comes from the attainment of a state of "no-mind". Shantha, too, has reached a state of "no-mind" and pure naturalness by being unashamed of her relationship with Pai which is socially unacceptable. Govindan Nair's carefree attitude to life and his indifference to the loss of seventeen sacks of rice, to the charge of bribery against him and to his son's death display him as an enlightened person who has acquired the state of "no-mind". He seems to be detached and enjoying the supreme bliss of an inner calm which is a rare quality and one which ordinary men do not possess.

Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks,

"Govindan Nair has already attained the ideal. He has realized the state of *Jivan-mukta*"

She quotes from the *Yoga-Vasistha* to explain this state :

"The jivan-mukta state is that in which the saint has ceased to have any desires.... he may be doing all kinds of actions externally, though he remains altogether unaffected by them internally.... He is full of bliss and happiness, and therefore to ordinary eyes appears to be an ordinary happy man..... He is



wise and pleasant and loving to all with whom he comes in contact... though unaffected within himself, he can take in the enjoyment of others, he can play like a child and can sympathise with the sorrows of sufferers."<sup>1</sup>

Nair answers to this description.

Now, let us consider the theory of **karma** which has been symbolised by the ration shop. A human being is evaluated by his action or **karma**. The ration shop, ruled by scales, depicts one's life where the law of **karma** operates. Just as the colour of the ration card measures the amount of ration due to an individual, so does one's **karma** determine his rewards and punishments.

"Life is a ration-shop. The scale weighs everything according to the ration-card."

( P.44)

At the same time, the ration shop does not abide by very strict rules as becomes evident from the fact that the orphans, the needy, the widows and whoever asks for, get the amount required. The following explanation draws our attention:

"The ration shop is indeed a replica of destiny in operation. Justice is not always as accurate as our moral sense requires. But the presence of mercy is ever to be noticed. The attitude of those at the ration-shop is very accomodating indeed and it is often only the official formalities that are scrupulously observed, not the actual distribution."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice-Born Fiction*, p. 99, (quoted by N.S. Gour in *Raja Rao's Metaphysical Trilogy*, p. 148.

2. N.S. Gour, *Raja Rao's Metaphysical Trilogy*, p. 164.

This explains the benevolent nature of the justice derived in the rationing system of this world. It also takes us a step further to show that Rao lays emphasis upon the importance of mercy and forgiveness according to Ramanuja who states that the soul must recognise its sinfulness in all humility. Only then can the individual hope for God's mercy or *prasada* to descend upon him.

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* Rao has attached special significance to the building of a house having three storeys. This house is symbolic of man's earthly existence and the three storeys may be interpreted as the three states of consciousness - *Jagriti* (wakefulness), *Swapna* (dream) and *Turiya* (samadhi). The house, rising upwards in storeys reflects, perhaps, the stages of man's spiritual upliftment. It is Pai's fervent desire to build a house, renovate and decorate it. This is symbolic of man seeking for the fulfilment of his inner self. This small white house has

"an ochre band on it—almost as on a temple."

(P. 7)

The ochre colour, in keeping with Hindu religious tradition, signifies spirituality. Pai's house overlooks an infinite expanse of water and keeps echoing with the sound of the waves of the sea which are a constant reminder of the creative aspect of the Divine. The wall, enclosing the house, lends it security, and beyond it lies enlightenment. The author seems to suggest that the wall is the intellectual barrier which must be transcended in order to attain enlightenment. This wall, dividing Nair's garden from Pai's goes 'from nowhere to nowhere'.(p.14) In other words, it stands for the farthest point to which man can stretch his mind. The kittens walking on the wall are unmindful of the danger of falling. They are closely watched over by their mother. The wall symbolizes man's ego that obstructs his own liberation. The kittens walking on the wall have transcended the ego. Just like the mother-cat, it is the benevolent Divinity that takes care of the man who has overcome his ego.

Such a man gets rid of the inferiority and superiority complexes and attains liberation.

As the very name suggests, the two principal motifs in *The Cat and Shakespeare* are that of the Cat and that of Shakespeare. The Shakespearean idea is no less important than the Cat-theory. Therefore, it would be well worth to make a study of the Shakespearean world adapted by the author in the Indian context. The kind of world order created by Shakespeare signifies *samsara* or the world of everyday existence with happiness, suffering and death measured out in various proportions. Constantly in his works one finds a comparison between imagination and reality, between life and dream. The mystery of consciousness and the different states of consciousness appear in some of his plays. For eg. Prospero in *The Tempest* is like the *mayavi* who can call up spirits from their hiding places by his art of magic. By this same art he raises a storm, separates the members of the ship's crew, and brings them together again. Then, again, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we experience love induced as an intoxication which changes the state of consciousness of the characters involved. In this play love appears like an illusion or *maya* induced by the juice of a magic flower. The present work too combines appearance and reality in such a way that the reader is teased out of all thinking and, along with the characters, keeps swaying between imagination and reality.

Shakespeare's world is a sunny celebration of life in all its variety with all the things having their part to play in the Divine scheme. He gives virtue and vice their legitimate places in the world order. They co-exist as contraries in the fabric of life. Rao, too, upholds a similar world-view in the present novel where bribery, corruption, disease and death exist without disturbing the serenity of a world that is taken care of by the mother cat. The fake ration cards, the houses and the gold bangles bought with ill-gotten wealth, the ugly boils (bubos) on Pai's body— all seem to balance the warmth and merriment of the principal characters of this novel.

They do not, at any point, disturb the mirthful and carefree atmosphere of the novel. Both Rao and Shakespeare feel that evil has its own place in maintaining the moral equilibrium of this world. And both express the need for purgation as a necessary remedy for evil.

The law of *karma*, which Rao seeks to highlight in this novel, is identical with the Shakespearean world view. Shakespeare has written lengthy passages on this subject in his history plays. We find many instances of poetic justice in his plays which remind us of the *karmic* law in operation. Let us consider two of his plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*.

***Julius Caesar* : (Act V, Sc. III)**

Cassius : Caesar, thou art reveng'd

Even with the sword that kill'd thee.

***Macbeth* : (Act. I, Sc. VII)**

Macbeth :

But in these cases

We still have judgment here; that we but teach

Bloody instructions, which being taught, return

To plague th'inventor : this even-handed justice

Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice

To our own lips.

The disturbance of the natural balance is followed by a manifestation of God's displeasure in the form of unnatural and evil happenings. This is akin to the boils which appear on Pai's body.

Rao makes this 'metaphysical comedy' akin to a Shakespearean comedy in that he assures the complete well being of his characters who are looked after

by a merciful Divine being. Spiritual harmony awaits them once the sin is expurged.

Govindan Nair, a big-built man, zestful and hearty, is deeply philosophical though he expresses his views in light-hearted verbal intricacies which describe his inner contentment. Like Hamlet, Nair resorts to a bit of philosophic play-acting which reminds the reader at once of Hamlet's dramatized madness. Shakespeare's plays abound in such Nair-like characters who enjoy playing upon words. Other than his speech, Nair's stoical attitude and philosophy of contentment, project him as the Shakespearean ideal of the perfect man.

***Hamlet (Act III, Sc. I) :-***

For thou hast been

As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,

A man that fortune's buffets and rewards

Hast ta'en with equal thanks;

The office-scene with a play within a play being enacted reminds us once again of such a play within a play being enacted in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet himself gets entrapped in the mouse-trap scene when the disclosure of his stepfather's guilt compels him to consider the course of revenge as the next line of action. This scene spells out his **karma** which must be to avenge his father's death. In *The Cat and Shakespeare* the mouse-trap scene holds significance by making Nair realise at once that it is not the cat entrapped in the mouse trap but man bound by the **karmic** prison of birth, death and **karma** or deeds.

Thus, a close affinity does exist between the world views of Rao and Shakespeare as in the present work.

With the various motifs woven together in a narrative which appears to be a series of "non-happenings," Rao seems to underline the fact that there can be a

harmonious synthesis of all things and a spiritual contentment depending on one's attitude to life. He presents a world-order in which all things co-exist peacefully. The bacteria causing the British boils, the lizards feeding on the pus, the railway train, the men, women, children and the mother cat – all seem to be following a kind of pattern of harmonious co-existence where one is dependent on the other and there is no clash of interests.

***The Cat and Shakespeare*** clearly shows the reader that Rao's conception of God has changed from the ***nirguna*** of Sankaracharya to the ***saguna*** of Ramanuja, which makes the essence of Brahman more easily understandable. Various themes in the novel such as the glorification of the Mother Goddess and the exalted position ascribed to the woman and the portrayal of unconventional love substantiate the fact that the novel is based upon Tantric thought. Therefore, it also becomes a book of Tantric prayer.

Taken as a whole, this novel can be considered as a treatise on the metaphysical quest of Rao's hero which began with ***The Serpent and the Rope*** where the hero is a man of heightened intellectuality frustrated in his search for that Truth which he seems to have discovered in the present work where Rao has depicted him as a man of mundane existence and at peace with himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

## The Chessmaster and His Moves

Raja Rao's magnum opus, *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, written and released in June 1988, has been called the first part of a trilogy and was awarded the prestigious Neustadt International Prize of the Oklahoma University in the very same year of its publication. Appearing twenty eight years after *The Serpent and the Rope*, this is a complex and challenging work by Rao as it does not conform to the traditional aesthetics of the novel. The conventions of the novel seem to have been defied as one finds very little story in the seven hundred pages of the book. As the narrative unfolds in flashbacks, the reader moves across a vast mosaic of reminiscences, confessions and solemn theorizing.

The human situation involves major characters like Sivaram Sastri, Suzanne and Jayalakshmi and minor characters such as Jean-Pierre, Mireille, Michel and Uma. The narrator-protagonist Sivaram Sastri is a Tamil Brahmin and an Indian mathematician who meets Jayalakshmi in childhood in Chidambaram. He gets fascinated by her and an intimacy develops between them. But, winning a scholarship from the French government, Sivaram leaves India to join the *Institute International de Mathematique Pure* at Paris as a mathematician. While in Paris, he meets and soon falls in love with Suzanne Chantereux, a French actress and a married woman. Later, he falls out with her and is attracted by Mireille, another French woman and the wife of a gynaecologist in Paris. Subsequently, Sivaram's sister, Uma, arrives in Paris with the hope of seeking a cure for her infertility. She unknowingly sparks off an Oedipal drive in her brother which seems to have been repressed till then. Now, Jayalakshmi, Siva's old beloved, who has undergone surgery for her brain tumour in London, also reaches Paris for a change of climate. And it is ultimately in Jayalakshmi that Sivaram finds

the perfect woman. She represents the epitome of femininity that Sivaram is looking for in all his female acquaintances.

Mother is, perhaps, the key figure around which revolves the life of a child. But, unfortunately, the hero, Sivaram, has lost his mother in childhood. He is, therefore, deprived of the love of his mother since childhood. This could be the reason behind his trying to build up a relationship with various women all through his life. He seems to be yearning for the love which he missed since childhood. Sivaram feels lonely in Paris. While in his apartment watching the fish in the pond, he suddenly sets his eyes upon Suzanne and feels mesmerised by her physical beauty. This fascination soon turns into admiration and Sivaram gets a feeling that Suzanne looks holy and "untouched" and "knew no sin". (p.8) They meet frequently and Suzanne expresses an immense liking for Indian culture. This is what strengthens their relationship. By learning Sanskrit easily just by means of a little grammar and by reading bits of *Mahabharata* and the *Hitopdesha* she readily earns Siva's admiration. Like a shy Hindu wife she never calls Siva by name but addresses him as "you" or just "he" when talking to others. She assures Siva that she was his wife in her past life and Siva feels that

"she was my wife and only wife, and no one could ever take her place, however brilliant or beautiful--'No, not even the princess?"

(P. 624).

There is a sense of holiness about her and she adores Siva like a God, putting her head on his feet out of reverence. Siva is touched by her obeisance and appreciates her utmost devotion to him. She understands Siva well and they develop an intellectual affinity.

In keeping with her love for Indian culture, Rao has made Suzanne imagine herself in the past life as a tall and young Indian woman, walking down the Indian country road with a brass pitcher of water on her head and chattering away with other half-veiled Indian women while returning home from the village well. But,



despite all this and her adoration of Siva, the love between Siva and Suzanne is not everlasting. They soon develop differences and get estranged from each other. Deserted by her husband and having lost her only child, Robert, Suzanne desperately tries to regain happiness through Siva's assurance that she will be his legally wedded wife after a year or so. But, Sivaram does not commit himself to marry her. He rather expects unconditional love from her in which she must surrender her individuality. She reacts sharply by expressing at once her inability to give up her individuality for she tends to be

'unique even before God.'

(P.314).

She dislikes Siva for his

'I-the-brahmin-I-cannot-be- wrong manner of arrogance.'

(P. 315).

Siva thinks that she is destined with misfortune and leaves her for he feels that

"events are shapen by the rules of his chess game."

(P.195)

After Suzanne takes leave, Mireille enters the life of Sivaram and fills him with the pure experience of love without wanting a son like Suzanne. Love reigns supreme in Mireille's relationship with Siva. He finds her intelligence and physical attraction striking, and thinks that she possesses a "certain virginity" and "marvellous purity." They develop an understanding as they come nearer to each other. Siva considers her to be the source of his enlightenment while she proclaims to have discovered the man she has been searching for since ages. Mireille worships him with the modesty of an Indian woman while Siva feels sanctified in her company which, he says, will help him acquire self-awareness. Siva thinks of Mireille's fullness in terms of the fulness of Brahman as described in *Brahad-*

***aranyaka Upanishad.*** Mireille, on the other hand, feels illuminated and gets transported into flights of imagination when she meets Sivaram.

Siva, once again, puts across his belief that lovers acquire perfection in love by merging into each other. He desires that Mireille surrender her individuality and get absorbed into him at the psychological plane. She finds his demands abstract and fears that it might mean her extinction. Being realistic, she does not aspire for this kind of perfection. She says,

"Perfection is the touch, no, the kiss of death. And I have no  
desire to die yet."

(P. 407)

Mireille would like to lead an independent existence as an art researcher, a wife and a mother. So she departs from Siva's life.

Of all the women, however, it is Jayalakshmi who most influences Siva. She is an elegant and sophisticated north Indian princess married to Raja Surrender Singh. They are mismatched because, soon after the marriage Jaya discovers her husband's materialism to be antithetical to her own spiritual yearnings. She is imaginative and philanthropic, aspiring for true love. Surrender, on the contrary, views this marriage as his lot having fallen with her. Jaya soon becomes sad and lovelorn. But Jaya and Siva get on well. She admires his knowledge of the Indian scriptures and metaphysics. They indulge in metaphysical discussions regarding the meaning of life, sorrow, etc. Jaya's mind draws sustenance from these intellectual discourses. Siva likes Jaya immensely because, according to him, she possesses Brahmin-like purity and spiritual inclinations. Jaya has been described by Rao as the perfect Hindu woman by highlighting the following details—

Jaya always rubs herself with sandalwood paste, purifies herself before visiting the sanctuary of her favourite deity, sits often against one of the pillars of

the temple closing her eyes and entering into profound meditation. The narrator believes her to have received a “Devi mantra” from her *Guru*. She seems to be conversing with the mother of God in grave silent moments and also frequently hears the bells ring and chants the Devi Astakam even while undergoing treatment for her brain tumour in a London hospital.

Jaya and Siva have been portrayed as true lovers who have a feeling of reverence for each other. Jaya, regretting her own marriage to Surrendar, wishes that she had been married to Siva. But then, she also knows that there can be only one marriage for a Hindu woman. She wants Siva to forget her but their ties are too strong to be broken. They feel they have merged into each other. Jaya accepts Siva as her true lord and urges that, upon her death, he should incarnate as Shiva in the temple so that their marriage may be consummated. Asking him to live for a hundred years she promises to come back to him in her next life. On the other hand, we find that Siva, too, is overwhelmingly attached to Jaya and feels disturbed by her serious illness. He contemplates himself as Lord Krishna performing a miracle and curing her. Again, he imagines that Lord Shiva has made Jaya immortal by absorbing her poison in his throat, so she will live forever.

Siva adores Jaya so much so that he is driven to poetic heights in imagining Jaya as parrot, betel vine, bodhisattva and Kadambari. Moved by her simplicity, wisdom, purity and beauty, Siva finds her an object of worship. He discovers in her “surrendering womanhood,” and hence “the Benaras born bride.”

Siva and Jaya dwell upon the myth of Shiva and Kali and try to spiritualize their love. Lord Shiva lies at the feet of the Goddess Kali and Sivaram interprets this myth as symbolic of divine love between the God and the Goddess. Inspired by this myth Siva declares himself to be the deathless Lord Shiva while Jaya imagines herself as Shakti. Furthermore, Sivaram and Jaya attempt to immortalize their love by his decision to carry on his meditations in the Himalayas and her desire to live in “lone wifedom” at Kanyakumari. Siva thinks Jaya to be un-

marriageable like Parvati and the eternal bride-to-be awaiting her lord forever. Their love is described as being similar to the love of cakravaka birds alluded to in Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhavam*. It is impressed upon the reader that Siva and Jaya are eternal lovers like these cakravaka birds and await the consummation of love in their next life.

At such a point Rao introduces the concept of zero or *Sunya* when he says that Siva feels himself and Jaya to be absorbed in zero or *Sunya*. They have an identity experience culminating in a non-dual relationship.

So Jayalakshmi was joy, and when I was 'I' (and when could I not be 'I'), Jayalakshmi was me (as 'I') so there was no J., but 'I', and finally was there an 'I' ? No 'I' could not say 'I' to itself, for saying implies he who says and he who hears the saying, since I heard myself say myself, the saying was myself, too as the hearing was myself, thus infinity slowly became zero, 'There are many infinities, but only one zero,' as the scientists say. I was supremely happy, I had seen sat as anandam, Truth as Happiness, and this was the end of the pilgrimage to Benaras, this the celestial Ganga.

(P.330).

The concept of zero or *Sunya* is further dwelt upon and elaborated in the intellectual marathon that takes place between the Brahmin, Sivaram, and the Jew, Michel, in the section of the novel entitled *The Brahmin and the Rabbi*. Michel Girome is a linguist working at the National Centre of Scientific Research, Paris. Proud of his intellectual superiority, Michel initiates Sivaram, proud of his knowledge, into ontological deliberations. They argue on such matters as whether the word existed before the experience or vice-versa, what is wisdom, who is wise and how can one become a wise man, the nature of various races of men,

and whether they have a horizontal or a vertical view for seeking immortality or attaining nirvana--ie release from the cycle of birth and death.

Through Siva, Rao spells out the Hindu concept of a wise man. The Brahmin holds that a wise man is known as **Guru** in Hindu mythology and he answers all questions and removes all doubts. Coming into contact with his **Guru**, man becomes wise and it is this wisdom which can be called experience or "pure meaning." It is knowledge or **jnana**. Here Rao proves the superiority of the Brahmin by making the Jew close his eyes and admire the Brahmin for his awareness. Rao also makes Siva answer the Jew's query about races by defining only two races of men in this world. These are the one seeking immortality by looking the horizontal way, and the other trying to attain nirvana by looking vertically. The Chinese and Hebrew belong to the first group while the Greeks and other oriental races belong to the latter group.

The intellectual dialogue then shifts to the analysis of numbers and integers as Suzanne alludes to Siva's love for numbers. It is at this point that Rao steers the conversation to solve the riddle of death by means of **Sunya** or zero.

Shastri, the hero, answers Michel about the significance of nine and ten in numerology. He thinks deeply about numbers and the reader feels that Rao has employed **zero** in a metaphoric sense when Siva begins by stating that nine, being the last integer, is the harbinger of zero, the nirvana. Ten is horizontal and symbolic of infinity.

" From nine you could go back to zero, or go forward to infinity."

(P. 229).

The intellectual discussion between the Jew and the Brahmin reveal that they have different perspectives. The Jew seeks immortality because he has a utilitarian mind. For him life is more important than death, and he wishes to live a cheerful life rooted in worldliness. The Brahmin, on the contrary, aspires for nirvana or salvation through the attainment of knowledge. Sivaram has a metaphysical bent of mind and for him truth is more meaningful than life.

'Truth alone matters. Life is insignificant. Hence my  
mathematical craze. For me, life comes from truth.'

(P. 479)

Siva knows that all is nothing, **Sunya**. He holds, according to Buddhism, death to be a mystery, an emptiness or **Sunya**. When we die, we get absorbed in space. He argues that death exists if we believe in it. The Jews believe in death, hence Jerusalem is a great cemetery. Sivaram does not believe in death and claims that the dead at Benaras rise to immortality because here the Ganges comes down from Shiva's "matted crown of hair" to make the dead alive.

Explaining from the Vedantic point of view, Sivaram defines death as absorption into Shiva, the Kalabhairava. Truth kills death, and man never dies if he acquires knowledge or **jnana**. He says that life succeeds death; hence death is merely a change of clothes as the soul transmigrates from one life to another. This is just what the **Bhagavad Gita** explains :

Just as a person gives up worn out  
clothes and puts on other new ones,  
even so does the embodied self give up  
decrepit bodies and enter other new ones.<sup>1</sup>

Siva, Rao's spokesman, finds a solution for the world's problems in self-extinction which could be explained as vaporizing one's self into nothing. All his arguments with the Jew hinge on the opposition between zero and infinity. Rao does not seem to want to improve things but to dissolve contradictions completely for he believes that all numbers dissolve into zero as they emerge out of it. He calls the infinite merely cumulative, but zero total time, and aspires for perfection by denying the limits of time.

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1. *The Bhagavad Gita* II, 20.

The reference to zero exists in *The Serpent and the Rope* where Ramaswamy explains to Savithri the importance of zero, calling it impersonal:

" Zero makes all numbers, so zero  
begins everything. All numbers are possible when they are in and  
of zero. Similarly all philosophies are  
possible in and around Vedanta. But  
you can no more improve  
on Vedanta than improve  
on zero. The zero, you see, the  
sunya, is impersonal; whereas  
one, two, three and so on are  
all dualistic. "

(P. 205)

This opposition between the zero and infinity is picked up in *The Chessmaster and his Moves* and explained in terms of the impersonal and personal, truth and death:

" Either you accept the world, and  
build a human empire, accepting  
death and therefore, the pyramids  
(whether you called it a mausoleum  
For Mao or for Tutankhamen), or  
you transcend the world and as  
such death itself, and find the  
Truth of Sankara's 'Sivoham, Sivoham.' "

(P.145).

Siva describes the quarrel of man :

"The quarrel of man is between zero and infinity, between Truth  
and God."

(P. 670).

**The Chessmaster** clearly indicates that Rao, at this stage, wishes to include mathematics within metaphysics. Therefore, he has made his hero a mathematician though he hardly does any mathematics. Mathematical terminology are found here and there and we also find references to Ramanujan, the Goddess Namakkal, Poincaré, Pascal and Einstein. But Siva spends most of his time in using a mathematical method to philosophize with his lovers and friends. It could be said that he applies mathematics in his metaphysical discourses and thus proves himself to be Rao's mathematician.

Sivaram Sastri calls mathematics

"the ultimate metaphysique"

(P. 499)

and as

'being nothing else than philosophy construed in numbers.'

(P. 523)

in **The Chessmaster and His Moves**.

In the present novel Rao has formulated his own private equation and has employed words like 'mathematics' and 'zero' in a mystical sense.

N.S. Gour states :

["The zero to Rao is the noumenal reality, the **Sunya**, the **nirakar anirvachaniya**, ..... Rao uses mathematics to mean the abstraction or symbolism whereby we try to apprehend the essential truth". ..... Rao refers to 'the game of human existence as equation playing with equation'—



He states —

"Truth has to be stated in terms of a  
language suited to it. That is why I  
like mathematics. The square root  
of minus one ..... has no human  
language equivalent."

(P.8)

It must be understood that Rao is using zero in an experiential and not in an exact mathematical sense. To Rao it signifies both, in metaphysical parlance, the opposite of being, and the state of *nirvana*, dissolution of the ego when the sense of being and non-being are transcended. Zero can also be inferred to mean the state of silence,..... Often Rao uses zero to signify death or dissolution .....Rao deduces "zero is not nothingness" (P. 283). The zero-zone is just the area beyond thought, beyond becoming in the Buddhist sense."]<sup>1</sup>

Thus zero assumes many layers of meaning for Rao.

Rao's concern with *Sunya* is mystical and his passages on *Sunyata* are pure poetry

"... to be nameless is to be so true.

Zero should really be one's name. The

Buddha, had he not said?..... There is

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1. N.S. Gour, *Raja Rao's Metaphysical Trilogy*, p. 213-214.

nothing behind one so

sunya is my name .....

And be not Siva's name Sunyadhipati, Lord of Emptiness. From  
zero arise all numbers,"

(P.8).

By yoking words and numbers together he has evolved his own version of modern linguistic philosophy. He feels that only through numbers can the essential truths be apprehended. The hero says,

"..... Mathematics and linguistics seemed in many ways so  
close ..... symbols to express the mysteries, subterfuges  
and images of a human function, called the mind."

(P.215)

Rao feels that poetry, too, is a mathematique because each poet uses language and symbols to build up his own private imagery. To explain this he takes up a poem by Mallarmé and opines thus :

"..... That forces, the Gods, had not only names, but  
numbers, colours, geometrical shapes as the Tantrics  
believed, why even Pythagoras."

(P.34)

Rao uses mathematics to indicate patterns in the strange algebra of human relationships. Initials like 'J' for Jaya and 'S' for Suzanne have been used occasionally in the novel. Sivaram likes to play with numbers and sometimes thinks that he is going to write his "autobiography with equations" (p. 642). The mathematique of the mind establishes strange equations such as Sivaram Sastri moving from Suzanne to Mireille and Mireille moving from Sastri to Michel. Sivaram's first love was Jaya, and, he once again goes back to Jaya after

temporary affairs. Jaya is the Truth while the others are substitutes that become meaningless when Truth already exists. This is the mathematics of Rao. Siva says :

'You know, Jaya. There is only you for me.'

'What about Suzanne then?'.....

'A substitute', I answered feebly.

'Why a substitute, when the real is here.'

(P. 126).

Finally, let us consider the key symbol which is the game of chess and the chessmaster. It is a rich and complex metaphor making the title of the novel symbolic. The chessmaster symbolizes Brahman or the Creator and the game of chess is symbolic of reality. This is an excellent symbol devised by Rao to show that a divine play or *lila* is ever going on and each man is a part of this. It is an intricate game in which the moves are initiated by God who is the chessmaster. The narrator, Sivaram, feels that the law of *karma* operates in the game of chess. The moves in this game are as unpredictable as the mysterious ways of God. The chessmaster is a perfect player moving the chess-pieces quickly and deftly. Therefore, everything seems to be in perfect order. Each move is significant as it operates according to the law of *Karma* changing everybody's life. This is how the world moves on. The chessmaster or the divine player is indescribable according to Siva. In other words, He is conceived of as having a non-dualistic character and being attributeless. This is in keeping with the non-dualistic philosophy of Sankara who calls Him the *Nirguna Brahman*.

Rao has depicted the universe as a great chess-board where, as Sivaram asserts, the Lord Shiva exercises his control from his "mountain retreat" and plays with Himself and with his creatures. All events of our life are governed by the rules of this game which has not

"four order of pawns, but a million."

(P. 195).

Siva considers himself a pawn in the hands of the Creator, the master chess-player who makes us jump, move and run forward like a monkey. Siva has understood that in the grand cosmic *lila* of the universe we are like dancing molecules whose shapes are ever forming and dissolving. A chesspiece, according to Siva, does not move by itself. He says,

"He who is behind me, moves me to my next place."

(P.644).

Thus, Siva attributes all the acts to the Absolute. Man is the inept player who is free to move about and make his own choice. But, in reality, we are all pawns following certain processes and moving about in a particular order upon the vast chess-board. It is the chessmaster, the Absolute, who carefully controls these movements and choices. Going by this philosophy, Siva strongly feels that all actions follow as a consequence of the law of *karma* which is in operation. Hence Jaya's arrival in France, her marriage to Surrendar are determined by *karma*. He also opines that , in the tiger hunt, the beater's *karma* is joined with the tiger's and the tiger's with the man on the howda. It is not the Rajput king who plays the hunting game but the chessmaster, the Goddess of the forest. Who kills whom is known to the Goddess. So the entire tiger hunt, according to Siva , is regulated by the will of God. Likewise, Siva feels that the law of *karma* also operated in the British conquest of India and the war of Mahabharata culminating in the defeat of the Kauravas by the Pandavas. It was then Krishna, the Supreme chessmaster, who played the game to the end. This belief in the theory of *karma* has Vedantic significance since the *Bhagavad Gita* itself lays emphasis on the importance of *karma* (action) in man's life. Furthermore, Siva's belief that existence is a play based on the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara which, pointing out to the phenomenal

nature of the empirical world, states that the world is merely an appearance and not a reality.

Rao tells us that the player enjoys the game for the sake of the game alone since there is no opponent in this unique variety of chess. Man is engaged in playing with a superior opponent who determines all the moves.

"The Chessmaster's moves, are, so to say,  
subtle, magnanimous, sure. His hand  
is on your shoulder, not to tell you  
where to move, but to show the  
nature of essensic movement. And  
movement itself is the play. Ramanujan  
called it the Goddess of Namakkal,.....  
Ramanujan had only been  
given the *light* by which the  
riddles could be solved .....  
it's not the Chessmaster who  
moves, but you move, in the  
light of his presence,....."

(P. 506).

The *light* mentioned above could possibly be taken to mean the same as in Atmanand Guru's line which Rao has made the epigraph to the novel :-

'I, am the light in the perception of the world.'

This game of chess has spiritual connotations. It is not a serious game because one is playing against a helpful and compassionate opponent, the Creator, who seems to be using his creature only to play with himself.

"His compassion alone made us play  
a game, to show that we were  
free, and bound only by the laws  
we ourselves had legislated. Whoever  
said the laws of chess were definitive,  
immutable ? ..... I tell you. You are  
free. .... The Chessmaster will now  
and again, however say : You are  
winning now. Get up and go. ...."

(P. 509).

The author wants us to spiritually realize that we are and will ever be ineffectual players matched against an infinitely superior player. Therefore, he changes the interior dialogue with the self to a dialogue with one's Chessmaster in the last section of the novel.

"Tell me, Chessmaster, where are you taking me ?"

(P.515)

or

'But, Master, You are winning.'

(P. 511)

Rao thinks that the realization of oneself being led safely by a superior hand is a spiritual advancement on the path of discovering the essential truth.

"To play and let the Chessmaster win, that is the truth".

(P. 516)

The reading of the first and second sections of *The Chessmaster and His Moves* might leave the reader somewhat baffled as to what Rao is trying to

communicate and he might find nothing to hold on to until page 210 when Rao introduces the theme of Zero versus infinity in the third section of the novel entitled *The Brahmin and the Rabbi*. But, it is the last section of the book viz. *The Chessmaster and His Moves* which lends meaning to the first and second sections of the book which have been named *The Turk and the Tiger Hunt* and *The Goblets of Shiraz* respectively. The former symbolically expresses a *karmic* equation through the metaphor of a tiger-hunt where the tiger killing the native gets killed by the hunter, *shikari*. This is like the different pawns on the chess-board moving according to their own laws of *karma* and becoming interlinked in an equation of violence and death.

The second section named *The Goblets of Shiraz* is slow and sensuous depicting the divine play as the mysticism of eros. This aspect of the chess game upholds eros and sensuality as an essential part of the cosmic *lila*.

Thereafter, in the third section, many pages of political discourses make the reader feel he is encountering a chess-game of war and peace.

But, it is the last section of the novel that sums up all what Rao wishes to spell out to the sensitive reader by using the chess game motif with the master player who is the Chessmaster, The Absolute.

Rao has skilfully used the chess game motif in all its varied implications and made it an excellent symbol to convey his thoughts about reality and God. He has given the chess game a metaphysical dimension.

Appearing twenty eight years after Rao's major work, *The Serpent and the Rope*, this novel is rather slow with a narrative which is meandering and reflective in style. The thematic preoccupations and the characters appear to be similar in both *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Chessmaster*. There is a strong resemblance in the characters of both the books so that the characters of the present novel seem to have evolved from the former. Hence we find Sivaram

Sastri in place of Ramaswamy, Suzanne instead of Madeleine, Jayalakshmi instead of Savithri, Surrender in place of Pratap, Uma instead of Saroja, Mireille instead of Catherine, Rati in place of Lakshmi, Madame X instead of Tante Zoubie and Michel replacing Georges.

The intellectual climate is the same in both the books and some of the scenes in the former book recur almost inevitably. Ideas, too, have been repeated. Nevertheless, *The Chessmaster* seems to be an advancement upon the former because the philosophy appears more clearly expressed. Moreover, Rao has introduced mathematics and made his hero a mathematician. The hero, Ramaswamy, in *The Serpent and the Rope* was a historian. But, by making Sivaram Sastri a mathematician, Rao has included mathematics within metaphysics. Sastri has defined mathematics as "the ultimate metaphysique" and as 'philosophy construed in numbers.'

Rao has once again projected India through various aspects of her philosophy. He has used the thin film of a narrative to indulge in contemplation and philosophizing which he seems to be so fond of. Not much action takes place in the novel. The four sections of the novel are vehicles to convey to the reader Rao's definition of Indian philosophy. The Indian *karma* theory forms the crux of the novel. It underlies the tiger-hunt metaphor in the section entitled *The Turk and the Tiger Hunt* and is later explained more elaborately through the key-symbol viz. the chess game and the Chessmaster.

A considerable portion has been devoted to Sivaram's alliances with womenfolk, both Indian and Western in an attempt to reveal that it is actually his quest for that one Woman. The others are mere substitutes. He is unable to sustain any of these relationships with women because he seems to be searching for that eiptome of Indian womanhood which he at last finds in Jayalakshmi. She has been made to represent an ideal Hindu wife and an ideal Indian woman. Their relationship is symbolic of divine love between Lord Shiva and Shakti.



Tantric thought is interspersed in the novel as we find Siva going from one woman to another and observing that man can only realize God through “the innermost recesses of woman”. He says that woman must be worshipped because it is through acceptance and not denial of woman that one can attain liberation. Impelled by such thoughts, he turns to Tantric *sadhana* as he seeks liberation through pleasures of the world. Siva asserts that we can surpass death if we know woman truly. This idealization of woman appears to be drawn from Tantra. The *Yoginihrdaya Tantra* describes woman as a baffling mystery and no one except God Shiva knows the heart of woman.<sup>1</sup>

Jayalakshmi's assertion of a woman seeking liberation by worshipping her husband is the same as enshrined in *The Great Liberation : Mahanirvana Tantra* which states that a woman who pleases her husband attains heaven.<sup>2</sup> Conventional marriage has been criticized by several characters in the novel. Siva's extra marital affairs with Suzanne, Mireille or Jayalakshmi as well as Jean Pierre's illicit relationship with women conform to the Tantric tradition which expounds adulterous love symbolizing it as the exemplary relationship between Radha and Krishna.

Tantra expounds the worship of womanhood. Siva is of the opinion that Mireille's beautiful breasts, which are like the Goblets of Shiraz, will show him God's paradise :

“Thus to venerate and to worship womanhood, I realized little  
by little, is to open up the universe of inner subtleties, whose

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1. Sir John Woodroffe, *Sakti and Sakta*, 8th ed., p. 264.

2. Arthur Avalon. p. 221

(1 and 2. as quoted by P. Dayal in *Raja Rao—A study of His Novels*).

very presence subsumes the anonymous light beyond all ....  
the Goblets of Shiraz would reveal to you God's own rose  
garden..... it was Mireille who made this supreme gift to me.

(P. 342)

Suzanne's physical beauty reminds him of a Tantric ceremony witnessed in his childhood wherein he saw some Vishweshwara standing with a Tantric worship-plate in his hand and milk, honey and flowers being used to anoint a virgin. In this Tantric worship, the woman is worshipped as a Goddess while the male represents the God. A similar description is found in *The Serpent and the Rope* where Ramaswamy, the hero, describes the worship of a naked concubine. Siva believes that sensuality must not be regarded as the cause of man's downfall but, rather, as a means of his spiritual upliftment. Hence, it appears, that Siva follows the path of Tantra to attain liberation.

Traces of Vedanta are found in *The Chessmaster as* Sivaram aspires for a non-dualistic relationship with Suzanne. He desires unqualified and unconditional love from her and asks her to surrender her individuality. He alludes to Vedantic non-duality of Sri Sankara as he wants her absorption into himself :-

'Where there is no two *that* is happiness, *that* is truth.'

(P. 314).

Siva demands the same from Mireille who, he says, must surrender her individuality and get absorbed into him at the psychological level. He holds that, when lovers merge into each other, they acquire perfection in love.

Siva's observation about the phenomenal nature of the empirical world is based on the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara according to which the world is just an appearance or play and not a reality. Siva also proclaims existence to be a play. His remark about the earthen pot being not different from the earth (p. 549) is

symbolic of the individual self, *jiva*, being not different from Brahman. Calling the world a mad man's dream, he alludes to the Vedantic concept of *Maya* whereby Sankara holds the empirical world to be a city seen in a mirror.<sup>1</sup> Siva refers to the waking state, dream state and the deep sleep state which is Vedantic in import. Upanishadic is his description of God as "fulness, purnata", (p. 605). Mireille's physical attraction and "fulness" remind Siva of "fulness" i.e. Brahman as described in the *Brahad-aranyaka Upanishad*.<sup>2</sup>

By alluding to the Advaita Vedanta time and again in *The Chessmaster*, Rao impresses upon us the fact that the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara has a great impact on Siva. He believes in the Vedantic approach to transcend the world and death in order to find the Truth. Following Sankara's non-dualistic philosophy, Siva believes that birth and death disappear when we merge into the Supreme Self. For him the Vedantic *tat tvam asi* (That you are) is the ultimate Truth. He observes that the waves are nothing but water; so is the sea. This has Vedantic connotations because Sankara explains the *Jiva-Brahman* relationship in the *Vivekachudamani* as the affinity between the waves and the ocean where the ocean represents Brahman and the waves represent the *jivas*. But, owing to nescience (*avidya*), the waves are ignorant of their identity with *Brahman*. The *jivas* search for Brahman as the waves seek the ocean. Water is symbolic of pure consciousness. Just as the waves are ignorant of the fact that water is common to the ocean and themselves so are the *jivas* unaware that pure consciousness is common to both *Brahman* and the individual selves.

Siva, though a Brahmin at heart, seems to be half-Westernized and tries to link the teachings of the Upanishads with existentialism. Consequently, there is

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1. Sankara's *Vivekachudamani*, sloka 138. Also Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, II (1923; rpt. London, 1971), p. 580.

2. *Brahad-aranyaka Upanishad*, V. 1.i.

constant struggle going on within him and this inner conflict leads him to a point of self-negation so that he rejects the narrow concept of nationalism and quotes Sankara's famous declaration :

"My native land is in the three worlds (*Svadeso bhubanatravam*)."

He comes to believe that the real conflict is not between the East and the West but between the two world views which determine the two races of men :

'those that look the horizontal way, the way of infinity. And those that look vertically, the creatures of dissolution, the zero way.'

(P.226).

Rao takes upon himself to become the spokesman of the Advaita Vedanta, the traditional Indian wisdom of the Vedas and Vedanta which was made popular by the great commentator, Sankara. Rao was initiated into this by his **Guru**, Sri Atmananda, who preached that, at all times, the only reality was the Absolute. This logic which Sri Atmananda calls "subjective" has been used by Rao in his writings. In the present novel Rao asserts that one cannot find the ultimate reality or Truth unless one has met the **Guru** because only the **Guru** can show the way to the Absolute or the ultimate reality. Hence there is a longing for the **Guru** and the reader, like the protagonist, is taken to the point when he needs to seek the **Guru** because no one else but the **Guru**, by giving right knowledge, can remove the suffering that fills human life. Therefore, the **Guru** finds importance in the novel though what happens to the hero when he meets the **Guru** is left to be guessed. Only the hero's quest for self-realization and the means to satisfy that quest find mention in *The Chessmaster*.

Not only *Advaita*, but *Visishtadvaita*, which appeared earlier in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, appears once again though with a different theory. *The Cat*

*and Shakespeare* had *marjarnyaya* or the Cat-kitten theory of Ramanuja. In the present novel we have Ramanuja's *markatnyaya* or the monkey-hold theory to explain which the author has made Dr. Rao tell Sastri :

'But, sir', ..... 'real compassion  
should be, like the monkey  
and the little one. You jump  
from tree to tree holding on to  
the mother monkey.  
Hold on to Her and get everything.'

(P.283).

This is again Rao using Ramanuja's philosophy to tell us that human life is safe when entrusted in the hands of the Supreme.

All the philosophic systems one finds in the pages of *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* reappear in *The Chessmaster*. But these apart, Buddhism has made a significant contribution through its *Sunya* concept which Rao has skilfully introduced in this book. Rao has introduced mathematics into metaphysics and developed the *Sunya* concept so that it has transcended its parameter to encompass various layers of meaning. The interesting dialogue between the Brahmin and the Jew has been formulated by the author to put across his ideas regarding the horizontal and vertical world views and the relationship between zero and infinity. Zero represents the quest of the Indian for self-dissolution. Rao's hero feels superior not only for being a Brahmin and possessing all the wisdom of the Vedas but also as an Indian for having made a significant contribution in mathematics—the zero called the *Sunya*. He says,

'The Indians', ... 'gave zero a pure abstraction,.... to the world'

(P. 69).

India represents the quest for zero.

Rao attempts to find a common origin of the Jew and the Hindu by calling the Western civilization an offshoot of original Aryan civilization and hence related to Vedic civilization. He points to Buddhist influence in the Dead Sea scrolls and to Plotinus being influenced by Indian thought.

Rao has introduced mathematics to express relationships as equations. Siva says,

"words are numbers and numbers words ....."

(P. 318).

Rao has used a mathematical method to do philosophy. He has reduced relationships to equations and has spelt out the following equations :-

'the hindu-hebraic one, the vertical or the horizontal,..... the  
zero or the infinity, historylessness or chronicling : Krishna or  
Moses. '

(P. 260).

Most important is Rao's use of the chess-game motif since the game of chess originated in India. He has employed it to explain the **karma** theory which forms an important part of the Indian thought system.

The hero, Sivaram, can be identified with Rao spouting all his notions about an India of the past. **The Chessmaster** has no relevance to the present as it does not deal with contemporary issues. The life style of the Indians is that of the past. Though appearing in 1988, this book is rooted in the remote past and the author has not concerned himself with the current problems and changes in India. But he has, nevertheless, given the reader an insight into oriental—the Indian—thought providing him the assurance of a philosophy he can comfortably anchor on in the present changing times. **The Chessmaster**, despite its weak narrative, is a moving story making the reader introspect and reflect deeply upon the India of Raja Rao.

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## The Short Stories of Raja Rao

Although Raja Rao's fame rests on his novels, a reflection on his collection of short stories is significant in observing how the major areas of his concern already find roots in these short stories. The three groups of short stories entitled *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories*, *The Policeman and the Rose* and *On the Ganga Ghat* have attracted considerable attention because they give a total vision of Indian life encompassing its social preoccupations, details of the rustic scene which may be termed as the sights and sounds of India, its religion and culture and, above all, its metaphysics. Rao's keen understanding of the Indian rustic life and mind may be related to his spending a considerable part of his early life at Harihalli where his family owned ancestral land.

Beginning with stories like *Javni* and *Akkayya* in 1933 where Rao appears to be the spokesperson for the socially downtrodden and the unfortunate Hindu widow, we find this Indian writer, over the years, covering almost every aspect of Indian life with his pen as if he were using brush-strokes and creating a total vision of India upon a large canvas.

Following the graph of his thematic evolution, one finds Rao working his way through stories like *A Client* (1934) where a young man becomes the victim of a marriage broker, legends about serpents in *The True Story of Kanakpala, Protector of Gold* (1935) and *Companions* (1941 or 42), the decline and fall of a village tradesman's family in *The Little Gram Shop* (1937) to a greater national issue like the unrest of the 1930s in stories like *In Khandesh* (1934), *The Cow of the Barricades* (1938) and *Narsiga* (1944).

Later, as Rao enters into deep self-introspection, one notices an insistent quest for the Self and Truth. With varying degrees of emphasis this theme pervades stories like *Nimka* (1953), *India-A Fable* and *The Policeman and the Rose* (1978). Intercultural encounters can be witnessed in these stories which explore the human condition against the background of an East-West encounter. These stories, therefore, create a world that is predominantly metaphysical and densely layered with symbols and allusions which characterise the later Rao.

After a considerable gap we find in 1987 Rao publishing a collection of eleven short stories entitled *On the Ganga Ghat* with the tone of traditionality explaining how Ganga, the river of redemption at Varanasi, plays a vital role in the life of every Hindu householder who comes here for absolution. Replete with details, each thumb-nail portrait in this collection is significant and forms part of the total design.

In all these stories Rao's concern with *Dharma* as a whole way of life and his belief in *karma*, rebirth and transmigration of souls is a potent force strongly manifest.

The three woman-oriented stories viz. *Javni*, *Akkayya* and *Nimka* may be treated together to see Rao's concern for and idealization of woman. He seems to point out that the fate of woman is the same everywhere. His women characters all suffer psychologically because society has ill-treated them. *Javni* and *Akkayya* show Rao's concern for the plight of the hapless Hindu widow though Javni is a woman of the lower caste and Akkayya a woman of the upper caste. While Akkayya protests in anger and breaks down, Javni seems resigned to her fate and displays an inner strength while Nimka, in her suffering, is the embodiment of nobility and an inner strength and perfect control amounting to a heroic stoicism.

*Javni* is the story of an illiterate, lower-class Hindu widow who has been serving a Brahmin family with single-minded devotion. The story, set in South



India, portrays the caste-ridden Indian society. Rao has given us a touching character-sketch of a woman who suffers quietly because fate has been unfair to her. Rao has spun this story of an unfortunate widow who seems resigned to her fate without a grudge. A member of the lower-caste, she holds the upper-caste people in great respect and awe.

".....somebody seemed to be standing by the threshold afraid  
to come in" and "a timid voice"

in the beginning of the story prepares us to meet a person who is afraid and suffers a feeling of inferiority. At one point in the story the author clearly spells out the evil of caste distinction when he tells us that he could not bear to see Javni going to the byre to eat her food. He had time and again quarrelled with his sister about it to which she replied,

'They are of the lower class and you cannot ask them to sit and  
eat with you.'

For her, eating with a woman of a lower caste amounts to irreligiosity. Rao's hero, Ramappa, voices his objection to orthodox religion when he questions his sister,

'Are they not like us, like any of us?'

and he feels concerned for Javni

"slept on a bare wattle-mat with a cotton sheet for a cover, and  
she seemed never to suffer from cold."

She is almost akin to a cow as she sits in the dark in the byre and swallows mouthfuls of rice like a cow chewing the cud. She eats where the cow has thrown a heapful of dung on the cobbled floor. Her lifestyle and existence are like the

"mechanical mastication of the rice."

Javni describes the Brahmins as the 'chosen ones' and not meant to work. She says in all humiliation,

'.....The sacred books are yours. The Vedas are yours. You are all, you are all, you are the twice-born. We are your servants, Ramappa – your slaves.'

Thus, in its treatment of the caste differences, this story seems to herald Rao's *Kanthapura* which, too, is the story of an Indian village and its caste-ridden society.

Javni's gossip about village affairs also runs in the manner of *Kanthapura* where, too, the reader comes across such detailed narration of village affairs. Rao states that Javni.

"had always news to tell us.

One day it would be about the postman Subba's wife, who had run away with the Mohammedan of the mango shop. On another day it would be about the miraculous cure of Sata Venkanna's wife, Kanthi, during her recent pilgrimage to the Biligiri temple ..... Javni made it a point to find out everything about everybody."

Rao makes Javni voice the Indian villager's belief in evil spirits and black magic when she tells Ramappa ,

`They say,

in this town they practise magic, and I have heard many a beautiful boy has been killed by jealousy'

and again,

'My learned Ramappa, never go out after sunset; for there are spirits of all sorts walking in the dark. Especially never once go by the canal after the cows are come home. It is a haunted place, Ramappa.'

She also narrates the tale of the potter's wife, Rangī, who was unhappy and committed suicide one night by jumping into the canal, and then became a devil. Ramappa's sister is also described as having a horror of devils.

While narrating her own story, Javni appears to be a brave woman through all her misfortunes following her husband's death. She firmly believed them to be nothing for, above all,

"Goddess Talakamma moved and reigned."

And again when she was ill-treated by the women of her household who called her 'You dirty widow!' and spat on her, she contemplated suicide but refrained because, according to her,

"Goddess Talakamma would be angry with me, and I stopped

each time I wanted to kill myself."

It is this faith and devotion and self-surrender to the village deity or Goddess which one later finds in Rao's *Cat and Shakespeare* where he has taken up Ramanujacharya's doctrine of *prapatti* or self-surrender explained by means of the cat-hold theory. Nair's unshakable faith in the mother cat (the feminine principle or Shakti), representing divine wisdom and love, enables him, like Javni, to face the adversities of life and live peacefully.

Well versed in the religious superstitions of South India, Rao makes Javni mention the offering of a lamb to the Goddess Talakamma as being religion, and speaking against this sacrifice would be sacrilege. She believes that in return for this sacrifice, the Goddess protects her, has given her the love of her brother's child and the love of Sita. Thus Rao has informed the Western reader about animal sacrifice which is an important ritual and forms a significant part of the cult of the worship of the feminine principle or Shakti in India.

Giving a sad account of Javni's life, Rao highlights the plight of an unfortunate Hindu widow of the lower class who has been ill-treated by her own

relatives. She is called an "ill-boding widow," and "a dirty-widow" who carries misfortune wherever she sets foot. She is unhappy with her in-laws as well as her brother's wife who swore at her and called her names for wanting

"a palm-width of shelter."

Javni is called

"a witch and an evil spirit"

and not allowed to touch her brother's child whom she loves because she does not have her own. She saves up her little treasures for him. Rao uses this child as a symbol to show that it may be the only source of solace for an aging childless widow in a traditional Indian society. Javni is thus a victim of misfortune neglected by her near and dear ones. She is more than a beast of burden to whom both her own fate and society have been unfair.

In **Akkayya** Rao tells us the story of a Hindu widow who belongs to the Brahmin class. Despite the difference in their social status both Javni and Akkayya share one thing in common—both lead miserable and useless lives and are pitiful creatures. Akkayya is a woman of the traditional Hindu community where women are named either after Goddesses or virtues.

".....they called her Venkatalakshamma, Subamma or Nanjamma, one of those old names which meant all that a virtuous woman ought to have, that is *virtue*."

Satisfying a four year old child's curiosity about a widow, Rao's account of Akkayya runs in the form of a dialogue initiated between Akkayya and the child wherein Akkayya tries to answer all his queries about widowhood. The child's conversation with Akkayya and keen observation of her personal appearance get him

"half-initiated into the secrets of a widow"

and make him wish to know more. Rao does not miss out on the details which range from Akkayya's shaven head, the missing vermilion mark on her head, her bare hands that had no "bangles that clinked" and her dull sari which were the cruel and constant reminders of her widowhood.

Going back into her past we find that

"Akkayya was a pretty little girl, full of charm and intelligence"

who unfortunately, became the victim of the evil of child marriage at about eight or nine years of age. The author takes an ironical dig at the superstitious belief in horoscopes when he tells us that Akkayya's horoscope

"foretold a most brilliant marriage."

This perhaps decided her destiny and the fate of this girl, who had yet not entered her teens, was decided by others who married her off to a man much older than her whose son had already three children. Too small to know the significance of marriage, Akkayya was left to come of age, but her husband, Ramakrishnayya, died even before she could join him to spend some happy days together. Rao says,

"Akkayya did not understand anything of it and she perfectly enjoyed the doll-show—for it was Dassera then. They only asked her not to put on the vermilion mark and she did not mind that in the very least."

When Akkayya came of age,

"she was shaven and sent to her husband's family in Gagana."

This is how an innocent girl is sacrificed at the altar of customs that are unjust and cruel. Thus it is that Akkayya is compelled by the orthodox Hindu religion to lead a life devoid of love and care.

Even while making her bear lifelong the marks of widowhood, Rao portrays Akkayya as a woman who, true to her gender, has that inner craving for motherhood.

"Akkayya was now about eighteen. She always loved children and she began to ask why she could not have some.....  
women want children above all and they are jealous of those who have any."

So Akkayya quarrels with her step-grand-daughter and in a year things become impossible so that she is sent back to her father's house where, too,

"she had begun to be jealous of her sisters-in-law, all of whom had many children."

She only feels "happy as a deer" when she was allowed by the grandmother to "have all the children to herself." Thus Rao explains the significant place which a child has in a woman's life. This feeling gets reiterated in Rao's novels, *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Rao makes it obvious that it was Akkayya's *karma* to take care of the orphan children who were always supplied her by the grace of God and, though not having her own child, she had these orphans around her when she was dying.

Akkayya is, according to the author, like

"the black, moss-grown rock that hung over the Nandi precipice, firm, but insecure; "

Comparing her to a rock, Rao directs the reader's attention to the innate strength of this woman who has suffered misfortune and hardships in her life and breaks down towards the end in furious protest –

"She weeps like a mad woman. And when she shrieks the tiles seem to fly to the skies!"

Neglected and uncared for, Akkayya yet wishes to be remembered after her death;

'When I am dead and when you have burnt me, will you ever  
remember me?'

Even after her death none of the men in the family undertook to perform her last rites as a mark of respect to this departed soul that knew nothing but tragedy and loneliness and had been cast aside by fate and society. **Akkayya** is thus the account of the life of a Hindu Brahmin widow, a heart-rending tale of austerity, self - denial, drudgery and misery.

**Nimka**, another story about a woman of that name, appeared twenty years after **Javni** and **Akkayya** in 1953. The locale has been shifted to France and, instead of dealing with the plight of the Indian woman, Rao is now all set to explore the human condition in what may be termed as a multicultural encounter and presents a Russian woman of Caucasian origin who is

"of a simple true beauty,.... it had a rare equilibrium and a  
naughtiness that was feminine and very innocent."

Like Javni and Akkayya, Nimka, too, is ill-fated. But, in all her sufferings and misfortunes, she reveals an inner strength of character and is in perfect control of herself. There is a heroic stoicism about the way she accepts life. Rao makes her retain the necklace which was the only thing she could save. It was

"made of pain, -----a reminder of man's inner strength  
against outer odds."

But even in the heart of this Westerner, Rao has kindled a love for India and a curiosity about this land. Nimka gets acquainted with the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**, the two major Indian epics and the story of Nala and Damayanti. We are told that she was always moved by the exile of the royal couple, Nala and Damayanti, and established

"a link between the Smolny courtyard and the palace of  
Damayanti,....."

She also

"knew the Indian saying that the swan knows how to separate  
milk from water- the good from the bad.....and India became  
the land where all that is wrong everywhere goes right there."

There is also the metaphor of Sita Devi who had to face a succession of trials. Like  
Sita Devi, Nimka also goes through many sufferings in life and emerges purer and  
nobler with each trial.

In an attempt to establish an affinity and an emotional bondage with  
Nimka, the author takes her to see Uday Shankar dance, to meet the Yuvaraja of  
Mysore and reads out to her the full text of Tolstoy's letter to Gandhi. He says,

"That made everything possible, the conversation, the gentle  
looks, and a dinner now and again .....which made affinity  
permissible."

Yet Nimka loves Michel who, according to her, is a man of greater depth than an  
Indian . But Nimka is as virtuous as any Indian woman in that she never allowed  
Michel to even touch her out of her respect for the author, an Indian.

The impact of Gandhian ideology on Rao becomes manifest in *Nimka*  
when we find Rao carrying Gandhi to Paris and making Nimka put up the picture of  
Mahatma Gandhi on her wall, making her write that the Hitler police never worried  
her when they saw in her room the picture of Gandhi and making her hope that  
Mahatma Gandhi might still save the world. Rao makes Nimka believe that, in his  
violent death, Gandhi paid the price of righteousness.

Rao makes the universal statement about Gandhi when he says

"He knows, does Mahatma Gandhi, the pinching pain of  
mankind. With every scrub of the floor and every cry of the



child in the street, there's a voice that responds, and that is Mahatma Gandhi's. Mahatma Gandhi – is not a man, he is not a saint, he is a country."

Even in her sufferings Nimka appears noble and dignified. She has a deep respect for Gandhi and his India. She identifies herself with Gandhi and India. Here is a woman, a foreigner, who is left alone with her unshakable faith in Gandhi and a belief

"that truth would reign in the world."

Though merely a waitress in a restaurant earning just enough to support her and her mother, she has made a place in the heart of the reader because she remained unbroken by poverty or disappointment and never let loss or gain govern her life or thinking.

In 1934 we already find Rao experiencing the winds of change when he comes up with a story entitled **A Client** which is about a young man, Ramu, who becomes the victim of an enterprising marriage broker. Unlike other stories of this period that have a rural setting, **A Client** has for its locale the city of Bangalore where Rao has pitted Nanjundayya against Ramu or, as one might say, the traditional versus the modern India.

Nanjundayya, the marriage broker, does not approve of young boys like Ramu making examinations the end and aim of all their existence. According to him these are the cause of making people slaves and

'losing our ancient traditions and self-respect.'

And he goes on to give Mahatma Gandhi's views about examination being one of the most pernicious elements of our modern life.

'After all what does it matter in these days whether you are a B.A. or M.A. ? All get the same thirty or forty rupees a month.

And even to get that, what fortitudes, what briberies, what  
dust-licking humiliation one has to bear....'

Here is Nanjundayya speaking against modern education.

On the contrary the hero, Ramu, represents the enlightened young Indian who has already started thinking differently. He prefers an electric light at the bedside instead of the smelling kerosene oil lamp. Furthermore, he is frank enough to discuss with Jayalakshmi, his classmate, the evil consequences of a 'modern' man marrying an uneducated, traditional girl for money and have his life

"ruined because of a few rupees !"

All this leads to disturbing thoughts about marriage.

The subject of the prevalent custom of child-marriage is put forth when Nanjundayya tries to lure Ramu into a lucrative marriage.

'At nineteen, my son, you must begin to think of marriage.'

But Ramu expresses firmly his unwillingness to marry for a few years. Nanjundayya calls such boys 'modern young men' of Bangalore, which has been called the home of modernism. Jayalakshmi, a modern and educated girl, being in his thoughts, Ramu tries hard to refuse the broker but the latter finally does manage to entrap him with the Director-General of Police, Vishweshwarayya's display of wealth and splendour and his charming little daughter of eleven or twelve who appears before him gorgeously dressed up and sings a few lines. So Ramu does fall prey to Nanjundayya's designs but attributes his weakness to the superstitious belief that

"the cat he had seen at the window on waking up forbode  
something terribly evil."

In the motley crowd that Rao has picked upon to represent his rural India, we come across the Bania, Motilal, a village grocer in the story entitled *The Little*

***Gram Shop.*** It is a story of Motilal and his wife, Beti Bai, starting their lives with rags in a Gujarati village and finally settling in the village of Badepur as a successful businessman and moneylender. We are told that Motilal's great-grandfather, Bhata Tata Lal of Khodi and his father were rich men who, befitting their status, squandered away their wealth on "the red man" (British) and on concubines. Motilal, an ambitious young man, starts his gram shop and, in due course of time, overflows with money.

Rao tells us how this village tradesman resorts to various forms of dishonesty and his family is wiped out, the lone survivor being Mithu, the parrot. The author points a sarcastic finger at various kinds of dishonest means adopted by the common Indian tradesman — adulterating milk by adding tap-water, letting dust from the road add to the weight of grams, bribing the municipal inspector and his servants, money-lending with high rates of interest, demanding dowry from the girl's father and profiting at the time of a crisis such as at the time of the outbreak of plague.

In between the story are woven the perfectly intimate picture of Indian village life such as the little green parrot in the cage crying out 'Ram, Ram' to all the clients, Motilal's hookah making a queer gurgling noise - '*gud...gud...gud ...*,' rumours about Motilal's wealth being kept in a hole in the earth, his being a merciless wife-beater and his wife rubbing utensils with sand and coconut fibre to clean them. We come across superstitions about the grocer not wanting to let go the first client of the day, the morning fire twice dead (extinguished) being a bad sign to begin a day with, the fall of the lizard on one's body foreboding good or bad luck and the belief that an epidemic is a terrible Goddess' visiting mankind and definitely causing death.

Motilal's son, Chota, too, ill-treats his wife, spending most of the time with his mistress. His wife tries in vain to regain her husband's love by hanging a coconut in Maruthi's temple

"with vows and prayers that her husband might turn kinder to her."

The family comes to a miserable end with none but the parrot surviving. Rao might be implying that it is Motilal's *karma* that has brought about the downfall of his family and wiped it out completely.

We also find Rao experimenting with the myth-making power of popular legends in some of his short stories. Two such stories, *The True Story of Kanakpāla, Protector of Gold* and *Companions* are about the popular legends regarding serpents.

*The True Story of Kanakpāla, Protector of Gold* looks like a first sketch of *Kanthapura* because the story is set in the village of Kashipura which is also situated, like Kanthapura, on the banks of the river Himavathy. The narrator again is an old rustic woman who has a breathless and garrulous narrative style similar to the narrator in *Kanthapura*. The author presents a long introduction on serpent lore full of popular superstitions. We are informed that the serpent can be a friend and guard one's riches or be an enemy and bite you. The strength of a serpent's poison is indicated by the number of stripes on its hood. The gradation of serpents in "a quarter-of-an-hour one," "a half-an-hour one", and so on and the village barber having knowledge about animal wisdom and curing a snakebite by chanting

"strange things in strange voices with strange contortions of his face,"

with a jug of water in one hand and a cup of milk in the other, the snake returning to suck back the poison from the wounded man and spitting it into the milk cup and thereafter disappearing altogether— these constitute the perfect atmosphere for this story comprising miracle, vision and curse.

Naga is the "King of Serpents" and the "Destroyer of Ills." The story is about "a pontifical Brahmin" who is invited by the people during festivals or obsequies and by whose "brahmanic presence" they feel they have been honoured. This Brahmin, Vision Rangappa, collected money in a copper pot secretly hoping to use it some day for a pilgrimage to Kashi. There he desired to see Kashi Vishweshwara and, thereafter, marry and have a family. Thus, the importance of Kashi as an important place of pilgrimage is pointed out as also the Ganges as the holy river where Rangappa wishes to bathe and feel purified before he has "the supreme vision of Kashi-Vishweshwara." The mention of people on the way giving him rice, money and clothes tells us about a common age-old Hindu practice of helping a pilgrim with the feeling that one has done a sacred deed.

Rangappa's beautiful vision of Shiva and Parvati in his dream and building a temple on the top of the hill where Shiva and Parvati have appeared as the *Udbhavamurti* is like one of the many folklores of India which attach significance to places of worship. People bringing Rangappa copper, silver and golden plates to be touched and made holy show the blind faith of Indians in anyone who claims to have had a holy vision. Thus Hoskéré Rangappa became Vision Rangappa and kept the holy pot by the Holy Couple in this temple in the village of Kashipura. Then he married the third daughter of Pandit Sivaramayya and settled down in this village. Fearing that the red man's army might rob all the money, Rangappa brought the money-pot home and,

"digging a hole beneath the family sanctum, put it there and covered it over with mud and stone."

At this point of the story we come across

"a huge three-striped cobra, with eyes like sapphire, and the jewel in the hood,"

which curled itself near the money-pot to guard it. We are informed that the cobra, being

"the eternal guardian of sacred gold,"

this cobra was called

"Kanakapāla – protector of gold."

From here we travel a hundred years thence to see Kashipura undergoing changes like elsewhere in the world. Three times, we are told, the River Hemavathy has risen in flood causing devastation. This, according to popular belief, is explained away as the Goddess Hemavathy's fury at "the sins of her children." Fifteen years before the date of the story had been the last floods of the Hemavathy. Since then, as the narrator recounts, nothing eventful has taken place except a few marriages and deaths and elopement. The names mentioned by this rustic story-teller appear interesting because, as in Kanthapura, appropriate adjectives have been prefixed to the proper names such as

"eight-verandahed-house Chowdayya, "Cardamom-field

Venkatesha," "Plantation Subbayya" and "Vision Rangappa."

Old Venkamma goes on to tell about the misdeeds of the Vision-House brothers who had a greed for the ancestral wealth that Kanakpāla was protecting. **Karma** finds mention when this old woman tells us that it was, perhaps, Ramakrishnayya's **karma** to have children who fought like street-dogs in order to possess the hidden wealth. Rao tells us that it is one's **karma** that decides one's fate. Hence a man like Ramakrishnayya,

"with a heart pure as the - morning lotus,"

should be unfortunate enough to have children who are greedy and can do anything to fulfil their purpose.

Kanakapāla is said to have taken great care that no harm come to Seetharamu, the second of the Vision-House brothers who was his father's beloved son as he was learned, obedient and respectful. Surappa, the elder brother and Ranganna, the third, had tried to kill Seetharamu by drowning him in the river because they knew he would prevent them from digging up that ancestral gold that had been offered to the Gods. Rao evokes a mythical atmosphere when he says that, upon the birth of Seetharamu, Kanakapāla slipped into his cradle and spread his hood over him, thus making him a Godlike boy. Now the serpent guards him from further harm by lying near his bed. We are further given to believe that gold

"moves about from place to place lest the wicked find it. Only  
the holy ones can touch it."

Hence Kanakapāla changed his resting place so often. He only allowed Seetharmu to go to the lumber-room where, last of all, the gold was kept, because

"Kanakapāla knew the true from the false, as the rat knows the  
grain from the husk."

While it was once being fed with milk, it could sense Surappa quietly entering the lumber-room in search of the gold. So it left the milk and rushed to the spot and, hissing and bellowing and biting, chased him away.

Kanakapāla appears to be no less sensitive than a human being. This can be seen in his show of grief upon Ramakrishnayya's death when he lay by the corpse till it was taken away, spat out poison and did not touch milk for three full days. A week later, when quarrel broke out over the division of property, Kanakapāla also tried to separate the fighting brothers by intervening. Finally, Kanakapāla tries in vain to save the gold from the greedy brothers. But, failing in his duty, he was frantic and restless till he entered the temple, went round the deities thrice, curled himself at their feet and died by swallowing up his tail,

"For is it not said, a snake loves death better than an undutiful  
life?"

And curse is unleashed upon the Vision-House people who could neither find that forbidden gold nor could they wash their sins.

".....the malediction of Naga is upon them"

and hence child after child dies mysterious and untimely deaths, and no child is ever born to a woman of that family. Again, the author spells out their *karma* that

"Never, never till seven times are they dead, and seven times  
are they reborn, can they wear out their sacrilegious act."

The story ends on a note of fantasy when the narrator tells us that to this day the money can be heard clinking in the earth and gold moves about to be out of reach of the wicked. Kanakapāla, too, becomes an immortal snake that

"appears in the dream of woman, child or man"

enacting the last bit of his life where he expresses his repentance and dies, and continues to haunt the sensitive reader.

Six years after the story of *Kanakapāla*, Rao gives his readers another story where a strange serpent holds our interest and gives to this story, entitled *Companions*, a deep moral symbolism. This story, which reads like a folk tale, has a peculiar Indian flavour in that an Indian villager is made the narrator of this legend of juggler Moti Khan and his strange companion. Moreover, the legend itself is about Moti Khan, a Muslim, and the serpent, a Hindu Brahmin in a previous birth. Rao has combined vision, curse, miracle, rebirth and expiation to make *Companions* an interesting tale where the juggler and his companion are both seeking God. But, in order to qualify for the grace of the Divine being, Moti Khan must give up his passion for worldly love and the Brahmin must give up his lust for wealth.



As the story goes, Moti Khan, the village juggler, had caught the serpent in the strangest of strange circumstances while he was passing through the *sitaphul* wood of Rampur one day while on a visit to his sister. As he slept under a wild fig tree, he had this vision of a serpent that appeared in the form of a man calling itself Pandit Srinath Sastri of Totépur who had been cursed by the Goddess Lakshmi for asking her for

'a bagful of gold and liberation from the cycle of birth and death.'

According to the curse, this Brahmin would have to be born a serpent and stay with Moti Khan, a juggler and basket-maker, who in a former life had sought God but in the present life was enjoying himself

"on the lap of a concubine."

This serpent would have to amuse and conquer the hearts of men, women and children in order that his sin

"be worn out like the quern with man's grindings"

and he qualify for salvation. Thus it is that Moti Khan wakes up to find the serpent in his basket. He becomes, as Rao tells us, the vehicle of salvation for the accursed Brahmin. Once they become companions, both the juggler and the serpent start their search for God. The snake dances to the tune of Moti Khan's *pungi* (musical instrument used by an Indian snake charmer) while Moti Khan goes from village to village ever travelling northward

"for Allah called him there."

That the serpent holds a significant place in the religious sentiments of the Indians is evident from the fact that villagers spontaneously offered food to Moti Khan while the village women offered milk to the snake. Miraculous healing properties have been attached to this mysterious serpent which

"swung round children's legs and swung out, and cured them of all scars and poxes and fevers. Old men slept better after its touch and women conceived on the very night they offered milk to it. Plague went and plenty came,"

but for all this, Moti Khan could not accept money because the day he should be greedy for money, the serpent would bite him with its poisonous fangs and Moti Khan would die.

The serpent teaches Moti Khan the wisdom that he must forget wealth and women if he wants God. It keeps a strict watch on the juggler's activities and prevents him from indulging in worldly pleasures. Moti Khan is not at all allowed to have the company of women and even the slightest temptation is checked by this mysterious serpent. In desperation, Moti Khan travels northwards realizing that he must find God or else will be killed by this creature. Forgetting temptations he travels through jungles, mountains, broad plains, across the Narbuda and the Pervan and the Bhagirath, to the Jumna, and through Agra searching for a saint's tomb or *Dargah* to sit down and meditate. We are told that God called him further and further northwards because Rao wants to impress upon his readers that the journey towards the north signifies his journey towards the Himalayas which is the abode of the Gods according to Hindu belief. It is in these Himalayas that the hermits sit and carry on their spiritual search.

In his desperation to find God, Moti Khan finally arrives at Sheikh Chisti's tomb at Fatehpur Sikri where he decides to pray till he finds God. Sin in the form of beautiful women tempted Moti Khan but his determination proved stronger and helped him resist temptation. After twenty-nine days of prayer, he is visited by Sheikh Chisti who blesses him with 'eyes to discern God' and the devout daughter of Maulvi Mohammed Khan to marry.

The story comes to an end with the death of Moti Khan, his wife and the serpent all of whom were buried close together – a sign of Hindu-Muslim

integration. This is further emphasized by Rao when he tells us about Moti Khan having the incense when the serpent was offered the camphor. And when epidemic inflicts the town the narrator says,

"We fall in front of the pipal-platform and we fall prostrate before  
the dargah, and right through the night a wind rises and blows  
away the foul humours of the village."

Thus it is that we are made to realise that the serpent is indeed man's inner serpent accompanying him everywhere. It is one's own sins that lash one to find God. Our *karmic* journey through our self-created travails will take us to God. Moti Khan found his own special sin haunting him and sought God in hatred and desperation. But in utter frenzy he achieved *samadhi* and got both God and woman. It was a reconciliation of opposites. Beginning as a village folk tale the story establishes the view that only non-attachment can lead us to God and a spiritual experience from which there is no turning back.

The 1930s and '40s being a period of much activity on the national scene we find Rao, young and restless, concerning himself with a serious matter – the freedom struggle of India. We have from him a set of stories in this period which clearly indicate his metaphysical bent of mind. *In Khandesh* written in 1934, *The Cow of the Barricades* written in 1938 and *Narsiga* in 1944 are three such stories where fact and fantasy melt in the crucible of imagination to give a metaphysical slant to his writing and imbue these stories with a deep symbolic meaning.

Let us consider *In Khandesh* where the story is slight but the description of the ominous is powerful. This powerful descriptive quality which characterises the later Rao is already found in his description of Khandesh.

"In Khandesh the earth is black. Black and grey as the buffalo,  
and twisted like an endless line of loamy pythons, wriggling and  
stretching beneath the awful heat of the sun. Between a python

and a python is a crevice deep as hell's depths, and black and greedy and forbidding as demons' mouths. They seem to gape their mouths to gobble you... to grapple you like crocodiles on a blazing day and drag you to the bottom of cavernous depths.... And they stream out breaths. The breaths are white and parched, curling and twisting and falling back like vermin...."

"Trees indeed do grow in Khandesh. But they stand shaven and sombre like widows before their husbands' pyre. Now and again they creak their branches –a groan, an oath, a gasp. Men don't speak in Khandesh either. They blubber in their dreams. Trains do rush through Khandesh – clutter-clutter ..... clutter- clutter.... they squeak and snort and disappear for fear they should fly. The long black, quivering railway lines submit to them like a cat to its mate. There he comes....There.... he comes ...the monster...Bigger and bigger he swells as he rises up. He shakes and rattles and grits past you....."

The story begins with Dattopant's dream in which he hears the drumbeat, "Tom-tom– Tirra-tirra..... Tom-tom," which may be the last clarion call announcing the day of judgement. The drumbeat is an expressionist technique akin to the kind employed in Eugene O'Neil's play, *The Emperor Jones*. The drumbeat is a social custom. It has been used by Rao to induce the fear of death in Dattopant who hears an owl hoot deep in the night. Rao also points to a popular superstition when he makes a reference to the village elders saying that an owl on the tiles means death will occur within a fortnight. Fears assume the shape of a nightmare and Dattopant dreams about the owl changing into sheep which grew long twisted horns and became a buffalo. The black rider on the buffalo with a looped serpent

in one hand most likely symbolizes Yamaraj, the Hindu God of death. We have yet again a reference to Dattopant's obsession with death when we are told that his dream concludes with the black rider putting a noose round his neck and dragging him into an "eyeslutting hollow." Then Dattopant yelling 'Ram Ram' in his sleep is a reference to 'Ram Ram' being, according to convention, the popular cry or *mantra* to ward off evil.

From the realm of dream and fantasy we are transported to the world of reality. Though the 'tom-tom' hovers in the background, Dattopant's troubled mind which has, till now, conjured up fearful images, seeks comfort in the company of friends. Their gossip, ranging from litigation, suicide, arrest, police inspector and Patel, now centres around the new Maharaja.

With a beautiful description of cotton plants,

"Like the purity of the soul is their substance."

we are also told how the Indian peasant will suffer –

"The sun will hit him on the head, the earth maul him by the  
legs, the red man eat all his soul...."

After toiling in the heat and dust he will be exploited by the British, the "red man" whose trains

"rush toward the city"

to carry this raw material for the factories in Britain. This is how in the 1930s Swadeshi cotton entered the Videshi Market. Another example of British atrocity was Sona being tied up once to a tree and beaten because

"he hadn't got down from the cart when the Inspector was  
passing."

Everyone gets excited about the Maharaja's visit to the village and the hospitality they would extend. The villagers are vying with each other to show

"how loyal and faithful our villagers are to the Sovereign."

The entire village becomes merry and Dattopant even imagines how, wearing their most shining apparel, the villagers would bow and greet the Maharaja and receive, in return, a smile from him. The villagers find the visit of the Maharaja deeply significant. Govindopant has a vision of the Maharaja :

'He was God-like — like Raja Sivaji.'

The Maharaja's passing by the village in the company of the Viceroy, Representative of His Majesty who lives in London, becomes an important occasion for which the village people must prepare themselves. We have a glimpse of colonial slavishness when the Patel declares :

'They will pass by in the train, and we have to honour them by standing by the railway line and showing how loyal and faithful our villagers are to the Sovereign.'

At the metaphysical level, the villagers' preparation and waiting for the Sovereign could also be an allegory of man's wait for God and desire for salvation. While the villagers get excited about what they will wear and how they will greet the Maharaja, the Patel orders them strictly not to move the smallest hair on their body as the train passes by and, moreover, to have their backs to the train. The Patel repeats that they must have their backs to the train because

'some prostitute-born scoundrels tried to put a bomb beneath the train of the Representative of the Most High across the Seas.....'

Rao points out how slavery involves the death of the spirit of an entire nation that was ruled by the British. Even greetings could not be spontaneous and rules had to be followed. But this was also a precautionary measure taken because of the upsurge of the freedom fighters who had already become active in the 1930s and were taking resort to anarchy to uproot the British from

the Indian soil. Such terrorist activities as blasting bombs to kill important British officials had become the order of the day.

There is also a contrast between the thinking of the older and younger generations. While Govindopant is the spokesman for the older generation that is

'Loyal and faithful to the Sovereign,'

Pandopant represents the younger generation. He has returned from the city and, according to the Patel, talks

'of nothing but of bombs and pistols,'

and is corrupting the young men of the village

'with all those city ideas.'

He is threatened with arrest if he does not hold his tongue. He and Vithobopant are later arrested by the Police Inspector for talking together on the railway lines, and Dattopant approves of their arrest because they are

'young braggarts with their city-talk....'

and therefore dangerous.

We are told how Dattopant, Sonopant and Govindopant stand by and watch helplessly as the trains pass by because they are slaves of these foreigners who are taking away the fruits of their sweat and toil to feed their industries.-

"Trains on trains—clutter—clutter, clutter—clutter—with horses and buffaloes, coal, manure, rice, cotton, wheat, pungent-smelling oranges, melting moon-guavas, and juicy, perfumed, voluptuous mangoes. Trains on trains pass by.... day after day..... day after day.... They pass through Khandesh..... Men and horses, coal and cotton pass through Khandesh."

Rao has employed rural Indian imagery when he mentions the women folk bringing food for the men folk in the fields –

"They had a bell-metal pot in each hand, containing jowari bread and a chilli or two and salt."

Again, a sudden whirlwind rises over the fields followed by rain which makes Dattopant, Sonopant and Govindopant find shelter beneath a tree where they

"lighted their hookahs and puffed away."

While the men were eating in the field and the women sat leaning against each other, we are told that suddenly

"a whirlwind rose over the fields. It seemed as though the earth vomited, spurning and flooding to the very skies.----- Then all of a sudden there was a commotion in the heavens,-----The air was filled with crackling noises. And the earth pulsed."

This was the storm of destruction blowing over Khandesh.

Suddenly, hearing a cry of something strange and, then, a distinct noise, all the three men thought it to be the train that they had been long awaiting. In great excitement Govindopant

"ran towards his horse"

while Dattopant

"plunged into the storm."

But each had his own reward. While Govindopant was rewarded for his humility, Dattopant was punished for his vanity. Govindopant could see the Maharaja whom he found to be God-like – like Raja Sivaji. On the contrary, the proud Dattopant was killed by the ballast train that heralded the Maharaja's visit. He

"jumped forward and the train squashed him with a thud."

This was their *karma*.



The "Tom-tom...Tira-tira...." of the tamte drum, which is heard at the beginning of the story, is heard once more as the story concludes. In the beginning, the beatings of this tamte drum forebode death to Dattopant and in the end it led his funeral.

"And the fire consumed the body. In Khandesh the fire burns as elsewhere."

This is the fire of destruction which is engulfing and finishing a people. *In Khandesh* may be looked upon as a metaphor of man's long wait for God— the Maharaja. But all he glimpses is the herald-train. The story is a persistent symbolism of death and destruction. The futility of man's struggle and his life-long preparation to meet God form the background of this story in which the author reflects upon *karma*. God, death and destruction.

*The Cow of the Barricades* is a story with a modern setting but with a traditional symbol, the cow whose name is Gauri. The cow has been worshipped by the Hindus for ages and, therefore, holds great religious significance. Here again fact and fantasy melt to make the cow a symbol of India in the bondage of the British rule.

The narrator describes Gauri as a strange and wonderful cow appearing punctually every Tuesday before sunset and accepting food from none else but the Master and disappearing quietly among the bushes only to appear a week later. She becomes famous and under her influence even the snake and the rat play together in the ashram. We do not know who the 'Master' is but the 'Mahatma' is undoubtedly Mahatma Gandhi.

The Master deliberately tries to confound one of his disciples when questioned about the identity of Gauri. Smiling "with unquenchable love and fun" he declares,

'She may be my baton-armed mother-in-law. Though she may be the mother of one of you. Perhaps she is the great Mother's vehicle.'

Here Rao makes the real cow symbolize Shakti or the Mother principle which is so significant to the Hindu religion. Religious significance is attached to her as we are told that merchants called her the Goddess Lakshmi and fell at her feet hoping to make more money next harvest, students touched her head and tail praying to her to make them pass the examinations and young girls prayed to her for husbands, widows for purity and the childless for children. Thus Gauri was considered to be a miraculous cow. This alludes to the popular Indian belief which attributes miraculous healing properties to the object of worship.

Gauri assumes various roles at various points of time. During the freedom struggle Gauri was very sad to see the people suffering under the "red man's Government" and someone saw

"a tear, clear as a drop of the Ganges, run down her cheeks, for  
she was of compassion infinite and true."

Most of the story is taken up by a vivid description of the freedom struggle:

"Now at this time the Mahatma's men were fighting in the country against the red man's Government. The Mahatma said: 'Don't buy their cloth.' And people did not buy their cloth. The Mahatma said: 'Don't serve under them.' And people did not serve under them. And the Mahatma said: 'Don't pay their taxes.' And people did not pay the taxes. And people gathered, and bonfires were lit and processions were formed, and there were many men wounded and killed and many taken to prisons, but people would not pay taxes nor would they wear foreign clothes."

Here Mahatma Gandhi and the Civil Disobedience movement have been clearly described. Rao, like many authors of that period, is preoccupied with the misery and suffering of the Indians under the foreign rule :

"Life became intolerable and people moaned and groaned, but the red man's Government would rule the country, happen what may, and make men pay more and more taxes."

He goes on to describe how the mill and factory workers and their womenfolk joined the freedom fighters and built barricades against the British soldiers. Then the Master came to stop them from doing so in the name of the Mahatma so that there is no bloodshed. This is a reference to Gandhiji's non-violence. But, we are told, the people went on barricading till "one day they were masters of the town." We are also told how this resistance could not withstand the oppression of the British Government which called in soldiers from Peshawar and Pindi to suppress the rebellion.

We are once again told about the miserable plight of the people who, out of fear, removed their

"women and children to the fields beyond and cooked food beneath the trees and lived there – for the army of the Government was going to take the town and no woman or child would be spared." People hid their precious possessions and "young men in khadi and Gandhi-cap"

patrolled the streets to ensure the safety of the people in general.

Thus Rao seems to have spared no detail in his description of the pre-independence period, the 1930s. The cow is being revered like a deity as when Rao makes the people say that she would protect and save them. They brought and rang bells, lit camphors and broke coconuts at her feet.

Finally, Gauri, like Mahatma Gandhi, marched towards the barricades with her eyes raised and people shouted out,

'Victory to the Mahatma! Mahatma Gandhi ki jai.'

Then, she meets her end when a shot is fired.

"It went through Gauri's head, and she felt a vehicle of God  
among lowly men."

To the understanding and sensitive reader the death of Gauri is truly the martyrdom of Gandhiji. Like the great Mahatma, the greatest of freedom fighters, Gauri becomes an immortal name who, as the Master says,

'will be reborn when India sorrows again before She is free.'

*Narsiga*, written in 1944, is a purely Gandhian tale portraying an illiterate orphan, pariah boy's nationalist fantasy. The national consciousness aroused by Gandhiji influences the mind of this small orphan boy.

Narsiga's father dies of cholera and his mother of famine. He was brought up by an aunt who was

"a thin, tall woman, angry and effusive,"

who had taken a husband for herself from one of the widower pariahs. Lingayya, who worked on the Master's fields. Narsiga or 'Narsa' as he was called, grew up to be five years old when he was given five sheep and three goats to graze in the woods nearby. Narsa's childish imagination takes on mythical wings when he rides on his sheep thinking himself to be

"one of those powerful gods that have animals for their vehicles. Now he would be Shiva, the Serpent-garlanded, and the knotted grass became the serpent and the long-horned goat the bull. And now he would ride on Rama's chariot of flowers, a bale flower at the sheep's tail, and two others behind its ears. And my, such a rain of flowers welcomed him back to Ayodhya!"

His rushing to a mother sheep and sucking milk and taking his bowl out in the courtyard to munch his rice and pickles are characteristic of an Indian village boy.

The Master's brother voices his concern for the Harijans when he strongly objects to Narsa's aunt getting drunk at the toddy booth and beating him up mercilessly. The Master's wife gives a blanket to the old Mohammedan beggar, a shirt to Barber Ranga, food every day to Chandrayya, Sampanna, Rajanna and all the hut dwellers, milk for Chinnamma's and Ramamma's children and also knits woollen hoods for them. This represents the truly pan-Indian nature of Gandhism which was sensitive to the needs of those excluded from mainstream Hindu society.

From the description of Narsa's childhood and his intimacy with the Master's household Rao moves on to more serious issues such as Gandhiji's teachings and patriotism. After dinner when the Master and Mistress sit in their courtyard, Narsa's aunt mentions "a big, big man called Gandhiji" whom the Master knew and worked for. She tells Narsa that Gandhiji was

'an old man – a bewitching man, a Saint,---- He had come from  
village to village.'

She describes Gandhi's greatness and compassion for the "pariahs" (untouchables) when she describes him as the beautiful morning sun wearing only a little loincloth like a pariah.

'And they say he is for us pariahs --- They say he works for the  
pariahs --- They say he loves the pariahs, --- He is a great man.  
They say he is an incarnation of God, that is why everybody  
touches his feet, even Brahmins, my son.----When you touch  
his feet you feel as though the body has sunk to the earth, and  
you are nothing but a mere ant before an elephant. But he is so  
simple! He pats you on the back, and says we must love each  
other, and spin at home, and when he says don't pay revenue  
dues to the red man's Government, we should not pay them.'

Little Narsa is very moved to hear this. When he becomes a big person and can read a little, he is given lessons by Rangappa who is a student of the Master. When the teacher tells Narsa not to hate the red man but to hate the devil and monster in him, we at once understand that he is talking about Gandhi's principle of hating the sin and not the sinner. He tells Narsa,

'Tell the truth, and love everyone, says Gandhiji.'

Narsa learns about the Mother from a prayer at the end of his book. The Mother has been identified with the Master's wife, his auntie, as a Goddess sitting on a swan and the image expands to encompass Bharatmata, the Motherland, for whom,

"Narsa's eyes suddenly grew full of tears"

when he sang

'Mataram, Mataram, Vande Mataram.'

Narsa's curiosity about this Mother is answered when the other ashram boys tell him that

"one should fight for the mother"

and the teacher tells him,

'It is our country, our Motherland.'

It is in this way that Rao arouses the patriotic feelings of this poor orphan boy.

The teacher tells Narsa about the tyranny of the British rule:

'The red man rules us. He takes away all our gold, and all our food, and he allows the peasants to starve and the children to die milkless. He has put the Mother into prison.'

Narsa begins nursing a feeling of hatred for the red man, the British. He vents his hatred in such deeds as lifting up his long sticks and waving them in the

air for the red men travelling in the trains to see. Moreover, he takes Rami, Scavenger Sankanna's daughter, into confidence, gathers stones, stands by the bridge,

"and as the train slowed down, he took up stone after stone  
that Rami handed him, and flung them against the train."

Here Rao has portrayed the feelings and actions of an average young Indian who in the pre-independence years felt the urge to free his Motherland from the British yoke.

But, then, Narsa feels sorry for his activity and swears never to throw stones at the red man. He loves Gandhi who said, 'Love the red man.'

He, like the rest of the people gathered in the Master's house, feels extremely happy over Gandhiji's release. Fact and fantasy mingle and Narsa imagines Mahatma Gandhi flying in the air like Goddess Sita when she was going back from Lanka with her husband Rama. He imagines the Mahatma flying in a chariot of flowers drawn by four white horses. He further idolises the Mahatma as the great epic character, Rama, who is

'with his wife, Sita, and in a flower-chariot drawn by sixteen  
steeds, each one more beautiful than the other. And they will  
fly through the air and the heavens will let fall a rain of flowers.'

This story about a poor illiterate orphan's education and awakening to national consciousness is interspersed with features of traditional Indian life such as people chewing betel after dinner, and topographical details of rural India such as Narsa and Rami running

"across rut and puddle, dung and boulder, down the Rampur  
road, amidst screeching bats and hovering cows, over the  
canal bridge, and under the bulging, haunted pipal, and then  
turning round the Kuppur mound,"

and facing the cattle dust of the darkening village.

Rao has perhaps tried to show how in the mind of this rustic Indian contemporary history and the events of the day merge with the age-old myths. His awareness of the Mahatma and the country's freedom struggle blend smoothly with the ancient Indian epics and *Puranas* with the result that Rama seems to be reincarnated as Gandhi.

In the second group of short stories entitled *The Policeman and the Rose* Rao has repeated almost all the stories of *The Cow of the Barricades* with three new additions viz. *Nimka*, *India—A Fable* and *The Policeman and the Rose*. As *Nimka* has been taken up earlier, let us now consider first the story entitled *India—A Fable* which is based on a French locale.

*India—A Fable* is a story with a mixture of fact and fancy. The story commences with factual details such as a park in Luxembourg on a 'fragile spring day,' old men sitting by the ponds reading newspapers, fat women removing their kerchiefs and speaking garrulous words,

'The Sorbornard girls'

opening their blouses to

'let the cool air breathe down them'

and reading romantic fiction, and young men basking in the sun and sleeping while children,

'scampered all over the park.'

Very discreetly Rao lets fancy find its way into the story when he introduces

'a child of five or six, pink-skinned and clear-eyed'

who enters into a question-and-answer sort of dialogue with the author-narrator.

The story is set in motion by this simple question by the narrator :



"Where are you going?"

to which the child answers :

"To the Oasis of Arabia."

Further questions and answers lead the reader to discover a wealth of dream pictures conjured up by the child on the one hand and by the narrator on the other. The child thinks of 'Camel', 'Arabia', 'Sands', 'Oasis', 'Princess', and 'horse of gold' which signify Arabia while the narrator talks about 'elephants', 'India', 'forests', 'rivers', 'Maharaja', 'goddesses with four hands' and 'crowns of gold' which signify India. Between Arabia and India is 'a long journey' but as the story progresses, one set of pictures merges into the other. At the child's level it is a matter of wish-fulfilment. To him knowledge comes in the language of a fairy tale. As the story unfolds, the 'sand', the 'camel' the 'oasis', 'Princess', and 'Prince' are replaced by 'trees', 'elephants', 'rivers', the 'goddess' and the 'Maharaja'. The child does not have to go to the oasis of Arabia in search of water because the water of the Ganges flows at his feet. Similarly the Arabian 'princess' gives way to the Indian 'goddess' with four hands. Also talking about the wedding of 'Prince Rudolfe' in Arabia the child discovers himself to be talking to an imaginary 'Indian Prince'. And he actually declares himself the 'Maharaja' in the end when he says that 'the wedding is over' with the appearance of the 'Maharaja'.

Thus, for this child, India becomes a land of fable. The author-narrator gives him a wealth of information about India which are the Indian elements in the story. Rao tells us,

"A country with a lot of forests, and many, many rivers, is called  
India."

The Ganges has been described as a river that is purple. The narrator tells the little boy about Indian Goddesses,

'Ah, goddesses, well : they are ladies with four arms and a golden crown on their heads, and the water of the Ganges, all sweet with perfumes, runs at their feet.'

The goddesses are further described as 'One who is dark as the bee, and the other who is blonde as butter.'

They are -

'one for the wedding of the night, and one for the wedding of the day.'

About India he says,

'There are forests –and then, there are elephants. Then, there is the Ganges.'

Ultimately with all these images in his mind, the little boy is transported to a world of fantasy and we are told,

"He saw the elephant in the forest. He saw the river Ganges. He saw the two goddesses, with four hands and a crown of white gold on their heads. He rode the elephant, covered in silk and gold,...."

And he declares with finality.

'I am a maharaja, I ride the elephant. The wedding is over.'

In this story Rao has portrayed an India where

"the earth is warm with silence, and the Ganges flows."

It is a land of the Ganges, the holy river of the Hindus, their Goddesses, elephants and maharajas.

*The Policeman and the Rose* takes up the theme of human bondage, quest and liberation with an exclusively symbolic treatment of the subject. The

'policeman' has been used as a private symbol by the author. The concrete imagery interlaces with layers of metaphysical symbolism to make this story convey the ideas of *karma*, liberation, soul, *Guru* and God – all of which have travelled into novels like *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*. These become the major preoccupations of the later Rao and lend a metaphysical slant to his writings.

The 'Policeman', symbolizing the ego, represents the bondage of the self. Therefore, according to the author, every person is arrested by the policeman as soon as he is born :

"Every living man has a policeman, and his name is your name,  
his address your address, his dreams your dreams, (Of course  
in the dream, his name, force and function are other and  
inappropriate, but that is another matter). In the last life too he  
was a policeman– he always was a policeman."

More precisely, the 'policeman' could be taken to be the law of *karma* by which one is arrested as soon as one is born. Fact mingles with fiction when Rao narrates the story, at one point, as his "own biography" and tries to impress upon us the dictates of *karma*. He says,

I, that is, the policeman, was born in the Aswija Shuddha when  
the moon was bright and of the eleventh day in the year 19---,  
that is some thirty three years ago. He, that is the police-child,  
cried like every child, for as I said before, I was arrested  
immediately.... When I was born he said : "My child, I know  
your antecedents, or rather I know why you are hot and cold,"  
that is how he explained. "I am a big policeman for a small child.  
You are free. Grow and become free..."

Perhaps Rao's 'policeman' is telling man to grow up and liberate his soul by his good deeds or *karma*.

The 'policeman' representing both the self and the *karma* , constantly keeps shifting positions between 'he' and 'I' throughout the narration.

Establishing the 'policeman' as one's *karma*, Rao goes on to weave the story of the 'policeman' as an Indian with a sad existence in France. He has, after going through various forms of incarnations – vegetable, animal and human – at last been born a South Indian Brahmin who has to live in Paris with a dead child, selling spiritual junks from which he acquires much honour and fame :—

My heart was made into a Hindu sack with prayer-verses on the top as of Benaras – and I counted the doubtful beads --- I opened a shop of Hindu eyes – I the policeman — and Oh, what a chatter and a clamour was there. God, God is my business, I cried – Hindu gods. Five sous a hundred tricks—standing on the nose and breathing through the umbilical stitch, practising celibacy through baths and kundalini – etc., eating milk, and nuts to walk in the air, eating bitter neem leaves and sherbet for swallowing nails and toothbrushes and broken glass,— for telling the future – motor cars, mansions and marriages, and all, fortunes – I opened such a shop. The trade was good. I did much business. The Municipal Council of Perpignan – for I had moved there by now – voted me a certificate of fine conduct.

-----And I grew big. I became fashionable. Newspapers spoke of me. I was the policeman of God, and my certificates hung on all my four walls. ----- and all day all night the logical needle stitched my sores, and when I woke up, I had a good bath and I looked so fresh and young ----- I became a

legitimate divinity. I had fruits and flowers offered to me, and I was right happy. I was God.

This passage is a satirical comment on how 'holy men' from India do brisk business abroad in the name of spirituality. But, the Brahmin himself seems to be questing for true spiritual fulfilment. So he turns towards his motherland, India.

"Now, having set sail on this pilgrimage, I wanted to become a pukka God. So I went to India—my virtue would now have confirmation, my miracles have rupee value, my mouth would smell of fresh roses....."

India offers him the cure for his shrunken and somewhat uncertain self-consciousness. He finds it impossible to become the man he was in France. The truth is revealed and he realises that he had been living till now a life of falsehood and "corpuscled virtue". He says :

"In India, however, when I reached the Sanctuary of the Beacon, I lay on a cot and in between my sleep someone must have held converse with me, and I woke up in my own pus. The stitches all came off. -----My skin hung on my shoulder like a coat and my spinal cord was all visible and white. I saw into my entrails and it was totally a world of corpuscled virtue.-----I was alone."

This is how many an Indian, selling spirituality abroad, is himself spiritually degenerated. And the cure that is offered here is to return to India and search for the Truth.

It is when the hero sees himself naked that he travels till he finds Truth in Travancore.

"For there you've Two-feet and a rose. The rose is red elsewhere in Avignon or in Paris, and white in Travancore. The

rose of Travancore is the story of a pilgrimage. ----- such a  
rose I carried and to Travancore I came."

Rao describes the rose as a red flower in the land of Christianity and a white flower in the land of Hinduism. In other words, the rose, which symbolizes passion at one place, becomes the symbol of purity in another land i.e. India where the quest for Truth must end. The journey of the rose is the pilgrimage upon which the hero has set out for liberation. The rose symbolizes this liberation as it acquires the form and fragrance of the lotus, the flower so reverently used by the Hindus in their worship.

The author gives a picturesque account of the Hindu mode of worship when he says :

"-----the Gods demanded of me the petal of the rose, and I  
gave it them, I gave it them handfuls and clothfuls, and when  
the Goddesses were adorned and the camphor burnt, so great  
the flow of rose-water from the rose, the pujari gathered it and  
gave it as prasad and tirth to the devotee."

Rao's preoccupation with Travancore is significant as it was in Travancore where he met his **Guru** who guided him on the path of Truth.

"Truth has steps, and once you enter, in the verandah, at the  
footsteps is the Lotus on which Truth stands . -----I laid my  
petal of rose at the Lotus of Truth, and I never beheld it again,  
brother, my brother. And when I woke up I heard them singing :

*In between two thoughts is the dance of Truth,  
He who's seen it hath no rebirth.*

-----I became a man, that is, free and all that. Where is the  
prisoner, I ask, where? In the kingdom of Travancore there are  
no prisons according to the **Travancore Code**, that is the

Truth, and that is the beautiful Truth, said the white rose to me."

This passage contains perhaps the essence of the story and of what Rao wishes to state — Truth can only be revealed as one travels up the steps of Truth guided by the *Guru*. It is the Vedantic notion which Rao puts forth that these steps are the stages by which *avidya* or ignorance is removed. When this ignorance residing in one's consciousness is completely removed, (the 'policeman' vanishes and the "I" is freed from prison. One then becomes a liberated soul, free from the cycle of rebirth. Since Travancore, according to the author, is the place where he finds Truth, there are no prisons in Travancore.

Thus *The Policeman and the Rose* has a slight story with factual details but deals with the themes of quest, Truth, liberation from rebirth and *karma* — themes which are so dear to Rao and which form the basis of his later writings. Mythological names and figures from the *Ramayana* have been used and the present juxtaposed with the past when the hero declares that he was a contemporary of Rama and Ravana and

"had been a trefoil grass that Rama trod on in the principality of Kishkindha."

He again desires himself as

"the twin-eyed weed by the footpath"

that led to the Kulapati pond where Sita used to bathe. He describes the evil in him as Ravana.

The story has been given a metaphysical slant with an intricate web of symbols to convey the author's message. The story heralds the theme of one of his major novels, *The Serpent and the Rope*.

After a spell of short stories, when Rao had already started writing novels and was well into experimenting with new forms, he came up in 1989 with a

collection of eleven short stories entitled *On the Ganga Ghat*. This return to the short story after a gap of over a decade was a brilliant achievement because this work appeared as a new form in which there was a fusion of the short story and novel.

The title of the work itself has a tone of traditionality and spells out the central theme of this work — the stone steps of the holy Ganga, the river of redemption at Varanasi which is proverbially the last halt in the Hindu's journey of life. The dominant mood of the author is to explore the meaning of life in the holy city of Benaras which is the cherished destination of the Hindu section of the Indian population.

As Rao himself tells his readers,

"These stories are so structured that the whole book should be read as one single novel."

As the Ganges flows through the string of stories and holds a special significance in the life of each character, the author asks his reader to

"just flow with the Ganges"

and acquaint himself with the varied experiences of the innumerable characters.

*On the Ganga Ghat* presents India as a timeless existence. It is a mythical entity far removed from the present and peopled by men and women who are content to be ruled by orthodox religious principles constituted by an age-old hierarchy. Benaras is the place where Hindus from all corners arrive for absolution because "Home is Ganga Ghat". So it is that *rajahs* and princes from Bengal, beggars, merchants from Kathiawar, courtesans, crooks, and charlatans —all come to the *ghat* or banks of the holy Ganga in Benaras to seek the meaning of life. It is the last leg of their pilgrimage where they come with the desire to spend the rest of their lives in meditation and prayer. Hindus from everywhere come to Benaras. Householders who have now distanced



themselves from the routine activities of existence come here to spend the remainder of their lives peacefully in prayer like Muthradas from Vrindaban, Rani Rashomani from Bengal and Ranchhoddoss Sunderdoss from Bombay. They join the procession of those who live around the ghat — Chhota Munnalal or Madhoba, his friend, Shankar, Bhedia, Putli and his father, Mohendra and his gang, Bhola the motor-mechanic, Shivilal and Sudha, the daughter of Ranchhoddoss.

Each of these thumbnail portraits is replete with details and complete by itself, yet relates to the central theme. The Ganga Ghat is a place of redemption. It is from here that one starts the last journey of life. Therefore, we find renunciation and abstinence forming the core of most of the lives described in this work. They are on the Ganga Ghat to seek *moksha* or deliverance which is the last of the four-fold objectives of life of the Hindus. Yet Rao does not set aside the other three objectives, viz. the performance of duties (*dharma*), earning livelihood (*artha*) and sexual satisfaction (*kama*). Human happiness and sadness, failure and success are moulded by the Gods. The characters on the Ganga Ghat are such people who are resigned to fate and have no desire to better their lot. They have nothing to protest about.

"Life is so simple. God gives when He gives. For the rest, man has to say his mantras assiduously, eat good food, sleep, wake and work."

The story of Chhota Munnalal or Madhoba begins with a description of his appearance as

"a quiet, young man of the busy lanes of Benaras."

His job is to cart logs for burning the dead bodies on the Benaras Ghat. Madhoba is not sentimental. He enjoys wrestling matches.

And

"he is well-informed on all that happens on the Benaras Ghats, below, above and even in between, because of his Mohini."

For Madhoba, an orphan, Ganga is the real Mother who is always a mother for the orphan. It was this feeling that brought him seeking a job in Benaras. He professes to be in love with a spirit whom he calls 'Mohini' who is matchless in beauty and sings beautifully. Madhoba says.

"You knew of her presence because of the melody she sang —  
and she sang as no humans sang: ----- She never sang a  
song but always notes. And you could slip into sleep and hear  
them, there, that was her mystery."

Madhoba, who sat in rapt devotion to the Mohini when he first saw and felt her "feminine presence" does not need to go to any woman because women

"are the bane of Benaras ----- Virtue does not grow easily in  
Benaras. And vice has no better place...."

Madho is so spellbound by this spirit that he

"swore allegiance to her and worshipped her in his heart."

She visits him on full moon nights with sparkling jewels and bouncing hair.

Rao then lets the reader into the secret of the Mohini's love for Madhoba. She has been looking for some one to take her to Ramji because a spirit like her cannot approach a God directly but go through a man.

"And a man who has never touched a woman is our man."

So it is that Madhoba, pure and simple, finds comfort in the love of this unearthly being and goes on selling firewood to new clients because

"People are always dying in the world"

and in Benaras

"They die at all times, diurnal or nocturnal, and the firewood has  
to be kept ready."

Then we have the story of Muthradas of Vrindavan who belonged to the Kanakmal family which traded with Kathiawar and West Rajasthan in beads and bangles, sold winter blankets and cheap Kanpur prints for the peasant women, and kumkum and turmeric.

He was married to Lakshmi who came from a "luminescent family" but they had no children of their own because the Kanakmal dynasty had been cursed by a woman of their family, Anusuyaben, who had drowned herself in the Jamuna following her husband's infidelity. And, as is believed, such a curse would last for seven generations because it had been uttered by a 'Pativrata' — a woman devoted to her husband. Muthradas and Lakshmi-ben adopted a second cousin's son Moti Chand who proved to be a debauch and ended up leaving a childless widow. So

"Vrindavan was all sorrow and tears for Muthradas and  
Lakshmi-ben."

But, unfortunately for Muthradas, Lakshmi-ben was killed in a street accident. So  
he

"had no heart even for Vrindavan anymore" and "with his cloth  
bundle, his *Ramayana* and his small cash, came to Benaras  
and settled there forever."

Thereafter, we are told, Muthradas spent his days reading philosophical books, listening to "ecstatic discourses on Tulsi Ramayana" by Pandit Uday Shankerji of Kalyan and wiping his tears. He searched for a *Guru* and found Guru Sankarananda who initiated him after three years of spiritual practices. Initiated into spiritualism Muthradas now awaits his death

"as one waits for a car, the car that will take you to the Railway  
station."

Every year he gets three letters from his adopted grandson. And we are told that the car or death came to his doorstep in the year 1963 and

"his last procession to the Ghats"

was taken by the four-shoulder Brahmins. That was the end of Muthradas whose skull split in no time because

"he was a virtuous man..."

This is how a man belonging to a hereditary trading family leads a life of simplicity and meets death on the Ganga Ghat.

Bhedia, with his idiotic smile, tattered clothes, long nails, unwashed presence and childish pranks is

"one of the great men in Benaras,"

because he never spat on anyone or ever scorned anyone. He is happy in Benaras because

'Dancing girls become saints in this city, Maharajas wash the feet of Sadhus.'

For him

"In Benaras all is right. Shivji in the temple will make him a good servant, one day."

He has been described as lovable and one for whom

"all things are so real, so simple,....." so noble,

Bhedia is

so heart-clean, friend to all creatures and stones,"

and has great imagination which makes him happy in Benaras.

"For him the world is imaginationings. To live in one's imagination is truly to live in heaven"

he believes. He is unique in that he lives as much in the present as in the legendary past.

So we find him "here" at one moment and then at once taking "a trip to Indra's kingdom."

Shalwar Khan, a friend of Bhedia, is a travelling magician who, abandoning his wife (she loved drinks and ghosts too much we are told) on a river bank, ran off with his son, Putli, and took up a wandering existence, performing little magical tricks under a neem or tamarind tree and earning his livelihood. Finally he came to Benaras, "Shiva's mighty city" and settled here.

Then there is the little boy, Girija, who has come to Benaras from Kashmir for the Ram Lila. Only five years old, he loves Benaras because here children play in gangs and

"newcomers are immediately taken into the fold."

There are no strangers in Benaras. There is Mohendra or Mohone and his gang whose passtime is teasing Sadhus, thieving mangoes from shops, stealing bathers' clothes and cigarettes from men's pockets and money. Mohone and his friend, Kishen, have secretly planned to escape to Bombay and try their luck at the cinema studios there because

"Benaras is no good for ambitious people."

Rao also explains the importance of cows in Benaras. The cow is a holy animal for the Hindus. So Jhaveri Bai, "the fine Brahmini cow" lies on the cobbled street of Benaras and has spent

"eight or nine years here in real regal splendour."

She had been bought and left in this city by some South Indian Chettiar for

"carrying his ancestor's journey safely to the other world."

Everybody loved her because she was a gentle cow and she always got from the shops

"her mouthful of fruit or grains....."

Jhaveri Bai behaves like a human being and slips between pilgrims to eat a banana peel or

"swallow some fallen pilgrim flowers."

She has tears in her eyes while she licks Bhedia

"with a love that would move men."

The reader is invited to the Benaras Ghat to see for himself the tears of Jhaveri Bai as she steps neck-deep into the Ganga and appears to pray to Sita Devi to redeem her and her friends. And as she takes her dip into the holy waters, the author finds magic in this picture.

Shankar, the friend of Madhoba, is perhaps the only character who has had modern education and leads a normal life in and around the ghat. He has studied mathematics at the university and knows some astrology. Shankar gave mathematics lessons to some pupils and earned twenty or twenty-five rupees a month which helped him pay his college fees and his bus or bicycle hire, a coffee or milk occasionally.

Shankar never spoke softly.

"He could only shout. And you would hear him halfway up

across the river at Ramnagar fort."

He called himself a 3B ie "barbarious Benaras brahmin." Married to Padma, he became less of a barbarian because Padma changed everything in his house. She was

"a lotus-born, and such a gentle, civilized, sweet-voiced girl"

that she seemed to make

"the whole house sing."

Sitting by the Ganges on an autumnal evening with his wife and his mother, Shankar would contemplate upon the possibility of his becoming a business magnate and going overseas.

Rao explains how Hindus believed that they would become outcasts if they went to Europe . But, then, Ganges water was supposed to purify one upon returning.

"Pray, how could a brahmin go across the dark waters? .....

After all you could always drink some Ganges water, after your return, say a few mantras, and become brahmin again."

He also tells us that Padma has brought luck with her Monday fasts and Friday evening worships, thus showing the efficacy of fasts and worships in the life of a Hindu householder. The Hindu's faith in the wall-lizard's clucking is explained to the reader when Shankar's hopes of becoming a big man are confirmed one evening by a clucking wall-lizard. We are also told about the average educated Indian youth feeling hopeful about the British leaving India and business falling into Indian hands when Sankar thinks—

"The British would one day go — they are preparing to quit anyway ---- and all big business will fall into Indian hands. Prepare from now and you will win."

Shankar feels blessed when he receives the news of his wife's pregnancy and wants to rejoice at the very thought that he is going to have a son. Religious significance is attached to this event when an over-anxious Shankar goes to the temple with an offering of 'peda' and jasmines, sits with the large crowd of pilgrims and sings his part of the Shiva **stotram** :

"Kashika puradhi natha

Kalabhairavam bhajeth. Kalabhairavam bhajeth."

He then goes to the Ganga and, offering her flowers, asks her to bless him with a son who

"must neither smoke nor drink nor womanise. He must be pure

(*aparna*) and great."

This only goes to explain the fact that for the Hindu happiness knows no bounds when he contemplates the birth of a son who is going to be his rightful heir. Padma receives the gift of a ruby nose-ring from her husband and blessings from her father and mother-in-law when the announcement is made,

'Daughter, may you live a hundred years and bring prosperity

to your husband.'

The story ends with Shankar shouting out like a Vedic mantra,

'Zero is Ganga. Ganga is zero,'

and we are told,

"The Ganga purifies all. She gives song to the songstress, limbs

to the brave, paddle-push to the boat, and child to the wife."

He calls Ganga the 'giver of gifts,' drinks a tumbler of milk brought by Padma which

"smelt of almonds and of saffron and of fine good camphor"

and falls into a deep sleep.

We have Bholanath from Rajgarh, Ghazipur, whose father Gorakhnath was a wheelright by profession. Bhola, too, became expert in fixing carwheels and barely had he been married for three months than he was sent to Italy first and then on to Flanders along with the British troops. Thus Bhola and his companion



are forced into an alien war by the alien rulers. But they create a little India in Flanders by reading aloud **Ramacharitamanas** to the assembled soldiers. The reading of the Tulsi Ramayana by Bhola and Pandit Vishwanath not only fills

"the cold air of Flanders with utter sweetness,"

but transports the listeners beyond time and space and

"people wept on the Flanders plains, thinking on the suffering  
of Sita in exile, and under Ravana's power."

They return to their tents in "deep peace", even as the war goes on all around  
and wonder

"which war was which, here and there."

Through Bhola and Pandit Viswanath, Rao narrates almost all the major episodes of the Ramayana making Bholanath chant from the **Brihat Stotra Ratnakara** and Pandit Viswanath and his readings with: He who hears this story and tells this story of Sri Rama to another, were it a man, bird or animal, will be blessed by Sri Rama, So, now let us chant,

'Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram,

Pathitha Pavan Sita Ram.'

Bhola returns home to his wife, Rati, after the war is over. Rati has been secretly praying for a child when her husband comes back because in India

"a childless woman brings ill luck. Women will not invite you to  
their houses. They will not even look at you, lest your  
inauspicious gaze fall on them, and make them thus forever  
barren."

We are told that Bhola returns home pure as ever and has the gift of a son whom he calls Vishwanath after Pandit Viswanath, his teacher in Flanders. This name is also the holy name of Shiva in Benaras. Thereafter,

"Bhola put the household bulls to the yoke and with grandmother, mother, and the child, ringing the bells, the cart sped towards holy Benaras."

Unfortunately, Bhola soon loses his mother, wife and child in

"a virulent epidemic of cholera."

But he resigns himself to fate at the loss of his son saying,

'let Mother Ganga who gave him to us, take him too.'

Bhola continues to live in Benaras with his **Guru**, Pandit Vishwanathji, who tells him,

'Home is Ganga Ghat for he who's even once the Ganga hath seen. Never a home be a home where Mother Ganga floweth by not.'

It is now that the author explains the significance of the Ganges and the Guru in the life of a religious Hindu when Bhola says,

'never for father or mother have I wept as I do for the Ganga—  
this Ganga is my father, this Ganga is my mother.'

For him the red man's wars, the glory of Rome and the gaiety of Paris have no meaning as compared to the service of his **Guru**. He feels

'what could be of deeper worth than performing the services of  
the **Guru** on the Ganga Ghat.'

He declares :

'Never is there greater joy for man than that his **Guru** and his  
Ganga be side by side.'

The author tells us that a dip in the Ganges makes one

"Suddenly aware of a fragrance of holiness and the touch of a  
deep white truth."

We are told that Bhola waits on the ghat while his **Guru** goes for a bath. Upon his returning, Bhola goes down the ghat where he sits with a pipal twig and draws a triangle and then surrounds it with a circle, rubs it away and starts all over again. He answers the author's query by saying that the triangle with three points symbolizes birth, marriage and death while the circle stands for God.

'Till the triangle become the circle, you see, God will not be pleased.'

The tale ends with Bhola murmuring to himself a few lines extolling the holy Ganga and the greatness of Lord Ram. Hence, a wheelright, a very simple fellow, is made to spell out the meaning of life. He seems to have understood the essence of life as no one else has.

The story of Rani Rasomani is about a queen who has lived a very simple life indeed though she is the princess of Darbhanga and the widow of Raja Protapchandra Mojumdar of Bankipur. In his lifetime Raja Protapchandra rejoiced in drink, loved the Europeans and was full of European manners after returning from a holiday in England. But Rani Rasomani spent her days in anxiety because she could not have a child within a year of her marriage. She spent her time consulting astrologers who gave her talismans and visiting sadhus who gave her sanctified rice asking her to fast every Monday and go to Mathura, Prayag, Benaras. But before the pilgrimage Raja Protapchandra died in Bankipur. The Rani took his ashes to Benaras, and never returned. There she gave birth to a posthumous daughter, but her life since then has moved around bath, worship and listening to the recital of the **Mahabharata**.

Even in her old age when

"she had no teeth and her eyes were whitey dim"

she still followed the daily routine of going out in a palanquin for her ritual bath and worship. She was a devotee of Lord Shiva and

"when she thought of Lord Shiva he was present to her, with the serpent garland, the tiger skin, the Ganges crown, his third eye filled with compassion. For her Shiva was real."

She also revered Ma Ananda Mayee who had blessed her with a mantra, and had touched her beads.

But, despite all this, the Rani is lonely.

"Nobody comes to see her. Nobody does she go and see...  
...She felt no evil against anyone. She felt no love either. She waited for death as a baby-bird awaits its mother's beak, a gnat or caterpillar for food."

She keeps storing piles of sandal-wood to be used for her funeral pyre

"so that when she will be burnt Benaras will all smell holy."

Thus, a royal widow, according to Rao, is like any other widow on the Ganga ghat who wears white, visits Shiva's temple and does not concern herself with either war or government.

We have now the story of Shivalal who came from the forests of Madhya Pradesh where he "knew more about leopards, tigers and hyenas" than of city people. Lying on his Ganga ghat bed he recounts the events of his life — his grand-father's sudden death, then his father's death and his wicked uncle, Maganlal, driving his nephews and niece to the streets. His wife came from a well-off family but could do things with

"talismans and dark mantras and marsh-creatures  
and the nail-driving-in-the-courtyard stuff."

The author gives a detailed account of the black-magic and witchcraft which uneducated people in India practise and cause death and destruction. The uncle and his wife want to adapt themselves to the modern ways of living and,

therefore, the uncle sports a Western jacket and buys his wife Bata slippers. Modernity is satirized when Rao says,

"With jacket and Bata slippers you can drink the best air God  
ever offered on earth."

Modernity signifies all that is British so that

"the picture of Gandhi on your wall is a disgrace for so  
important a landowning family," and "everybody fears you,  
feared anybody who'd a gun."

Shivlal one day met a Sadhu at the Dholpur railway station who had the magical power to make a train stop. He gained popularity at once as is usual in India even today. People respected him and

"made a place for him, to sit. Some brought out a pillow, and  
others carpets, and a few lit incense sticks. Some offered him  
bananas."

So Shivlal became his companion and after many wanderings they came to Benaras. But the Sadhu was an ill-tempered man and a person difficult to serve. He was taken up by a concubine, Nanna, who "is like a great big rock" because she is so firm. Rao tells us about Benaras concubines being famous through history. Shivlal became a pimp bringing men to Nanna and making a lot of money and keeping it in a heavy steel trunk but always praying to be kept pure. Shivlal again met the Sadhu on the Ganga ghat and stayed with him making the hookah and filling it with chillum, and chanting the mantra which the Sadhu had given him.

But, surprisingly enough, one day Shivlal took the trunk to the Ganga ghat and left it under the tree. What followed seemed to render all his efforts meaningless because on Divali night he tore up all the notes he had so carefully collected

"as if he were tearing splinters from a firewood."

The Sadhu joined him in this activity and then both sat by the Ganges and threw every bit of paper into her waters. In this strange manner did Shivalal celebrate his Divali. Shivalal perhaps realises the futility of amassing wealth when nothing will accompany you on your last journey. His action is the outcome of his deep realisation that material possessions must be renounced when preparing for the last journey of life.

And, finally, we are introduced to Ranchoddoss Sunderdoss and his daughter, Sudha. The story of Ranchoddoss Sunderdoss begins with a detailed account of how he belongs to a family owning a very old jewellery business and how his family has built a temple and organized regular *kirtans* (religious songs) to commemorate the vision of Lord Pandurang. We are told that at festival times the temple was crowded with worshippers who prayed for a son.

"Of what worth a woman's womb that does not bear a toddling

heir?"

Since ages it has been like this— Indians, particularly Hindus, feel blessed to have a son who will be the rightful heir.

A hard-working and devoutly honest man, Ranchoddoss had two sons and a daughter called Sudha. She was the youngest and "the most loved of all." A fun-loving girl who brought prosperity to the household, Sudha suddenly grew serious with age. Initially attending Saint Mary's Convent School off Pedder Road, she now started avoiding school as she grew into her teens and hated marriage. But, the author tells us, a girl must get married because she is destined for it as a wheel is destined for the cart. There is the prejudice against women becoming politicians or professors because that is against the traditional Hindu belief. It seems to be an idea imported from Europe.

"And all that European talk of women going to become politicians or professors is so much like making the river run backwards back."

At the age of fifteen Sudha started spending long hours in the family sanctuary repeating the name of Lord Rama, fasting and spending days in silence and meditation. A few years later one night she has a real vision of a sadhu who would initiate her and help her to become a true devotee of the Lord. A handsome looking sadhu actually comes to her house after a few days and Sudha suddenly remembers her past life. There is a reference to her unfulfilled desire in her former life to burn herself with her dead husband befitting the legendary glory of Hindu wives.

"How noble it was in the old virtuous days: you could be burnt with your spouse, your Lord. It's a pity the British came and stopped it all."

This lament bypasses the historical truth that unwilling widows were burnt for commercial gain and Hindu scholars, finding widow-burning contrary to the holy texts, launched a massive agitation. Corruption has been sanctified simply because it was in practice.

On an auspicious day Sudha is initiated to **sannyas** and, renouncing the world, she puts on the white sari and accompanies the sadhu to the Himalayas. When her brother Govinddoss and Vithaldoss were married and prosperous, her father left home to seek her and found her in Benaras. She was living in a little brick and mortar house off Hanuman Ghat, reading the **Vasista Ramayana** to widows and ascetics, retired judges and ex-Congress ministers and to almost anyone. She helps Ranchoddoss find a room in Benaras and explains how happy she is with her ritualistic early morning baths at the Ganga and her visit to the Shiva temple off the Harishchandra Ghat where she meditates for hours. In her room in a

three-storied house by the Dashashwamedh Ghat sits Sudha reading to the people and commenting on Sankara's theory of Mayawada. She feels she has just been able to have

"a chink to the door of knowledge — to Jnan."

On the sacred Ganga, by the Dashashwamedha Ghat, Ranchoddoss also takes a room next to Sudha's and begins his meditations. He, too, gets initiated and continues to live in Benaras, waking each dawn, telling his beads, bathing in the Ghat, sitting on the steps for meditation and returning to his room to cook.

Both Sudha and Ranchoddoss are happy because they have found in the pure primeval Ganges the ever-flowing stream of knowledge. Ranchoddoss is happy because he realises that it is the mind which can extricate itself from all other activities to dwell in supreme peace. It is in oneself that one finds the Manikarnika or the holiest of all pilgrimages, the pure primeval Ganges which is the ever-flowing stream of knowledge and the Kashika, the pure Consciousness of Self. Hence we have him singing Sankara's

mano nivrittih paramopa shantihi

sa tirtha varya manikarnika cha

jnana pravaha vimaladi ganga

sa kashikaham nijabodharupaha.

Thus we find that the inhabitants of Rao's world range from the rich to the poor and unwanted, all of whom discover the meaning of life on the Ganga ghat.

"The power of man is to sow, the berth of woman to reap."

Husbands may be promiscuous but the wives rarely protest. They remain models of chastity. In the microcosm of the Hindu world, the woman has to either satisfy



one male as a wife or many men as a whore. A female ascetic like Sudha is an exception.

In the concluding chapter of this book Rao explores the paradox of existence. On the one hand it is stated,

"Man is mortal is the grandest fib man ever invented"

while on the other hand it becomes evident that

" all of structure's destiny is decay and disappearance."

As the knowledge of self has no existence before birth, or after death, therefore, the passage in between is non-existent. Without a beginning or an end, the middle cannot exist. Setting aside logic and rationality in all stories throughout this work, life has been explained away as nothingness. The self remains an enigma and life a miracle. The animate and inanimate, human and animal share the same chain of action and reaction passing through ages. Myth continues in actuality. The quintessence of Hindu orthodoxy lies in the refusal to admit change, the reality of time. "Reality" for Rao is not the experience in temporality but a perception cultivated by tradition and myth. Benaras is therefore holy because it symbolises the traditional defying the contemporary. It is the Eternal city. The characters are bound together only by the common grounds of seeking deliverance. They all journey towards nothingness. Each character is an isolate existence that has renounced attachment to materialism of any kind. Hence it is that Benaras with its Ganga ghat becomes the destination of each lonely soul seeking *mukti* or freedom from the cycle of rebirth. Awaiting death on the Ganga ghat their lives must flow on as the holy waters of the Ganga.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Gandhism Again

A major preoccupation with Rao has been the Gandhian ideals. Gandhism finds mention in the early works of Rao which include some of his short stories and his first major novel, *Kanthapura*. Again Gandhism has been successfully pitted against Communism in *Comrade Kirillov*. But the last major treatise on this subject is Rao's latest work, *The Great Indian Way*, which appeared in 1998. As Rao has himself declared in the preface, he has dared to write a biography of Mahatma Gandhi

"from the inside, desperately, faithfully."

( P.8)

He felt the urge to write this biography not only to present bare facts about the Mahatma's life as other biographies appear to be but

"to make facts melt into life"

( P.7)

and

"make the life larger than it seems."

(P. 7)

Rao has adopted the epic or the Indian Pauranic style to describe the flow of events as he strongly feels that the Pauranic style is the only one he could employ to write about this great leader whose life, through his activities, had acquired epic dimensions.

*The Great Indian Way* focusses chiefly on that part of Gandhiji's life which was spent in South Africa because, according to Rao, the seed of

Gandhism was sown in South Africa when Gandhiji was actually experiencing the bitterness of the conflict between the Indians, the Boers and the Britons. South Africa became the testing ground for Gandhism because it was here that Gandhiji faced many a humiliation and raised his voice against injustice and discrimination. South Africa may be described as the battlefield of the *Mahabharata* where the struggle for the cause of Truth (Satyagrah) and non-violence (Ahimsa) were tested to prove conclusively that

"wheresoever Truth is, said Bhishma, is Victory as well."

(P. 220)

Thus was born Gandhism of the later years which shook the epicentre of the British rule in India and spelt its doom.

The book becomes interesting and captivating as the author, uncovering each aspect of the South African struggle, endeavours to uphold a theme of singular importance— Truth which he calls "the real adventure". He observes that Gandhiji had tested the honey or *madhu* of truth and went on seeking it all his life .

"His politics, his legal activity, his fatherhood— and his duty as husband— everything became desirable only in terms of it. Each experience, therefore, became an experience with Truth, and there was thus not a region of human living with which he was not to experiment — nothing was ever to be taken for granted."

(P. 228)

All that Gandhiji practised in later life was experimented in South Africa. It was here that the steel was tempered and later enabled the Mahatma to sway the Indian masses to join the Indian freedom struggle.

*The Great Indian Way* provides a vast canvas for the author to apply the brush strokes of his vigorous imagination and unfold the meaning of

Gandhism and the life of the Mahatma — a life dedicated to use this mighty weapon to mesmerise the Indian masses and mobilise them for an effective resistance against the British *Raj* in India.

Rao began with Gandhism as the revolutionary force that changed the outlook of an insignificant little South Indian village in his major work, *Kanthapura*. In the 1990s when Gandhism had taken a back seat and almost gone into oblivion except for occasional symposiums and seminars, it is a striking factor that Rao comes back with it in his latest work as a vehement outburst against all that may be deemed as falsehood. A sensitive writer, Rao feels the need to emphasize the ways of the Mahatma — his struggle for Truth, peace and non-violence and his achieving *Brahmacharya*, and uphold the life of this legendary figure as an example for the world today which has steered far away from these noble ideals and enmeshed itself in a web of inhuman warfare.

With this work his writing comes full circle because he began with Gandhism and has ended with Gandhism.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Style

When the short stories of Rao are taken into consideration, the collection entitled *The Cow of the Barricades* appears to be Rao's first experiment with form and style. We find him experimenting in the direction which led to the evolution of a unique style in his major novels.

The form that Rao experiments with in these short stories is the folk tale or the popular legend with its myth-making power and popular wisdom.

The narrative strategy adopted by Rao in *The True Story of Kanakapāla, Protector of Gold* is to make an old rustic woman, "Old Venkamma, Plantation Subbayya's sick mother" the original narrator of the story which begins with a long introduction on serpent lore containing popular superstitions. This idea of using a narrator to tell the story has been used later in Rao's first major novel, *Kanthapura*, where, too, we find the narrator to be a grandmother of the village.

The narrator of *Kanakapāla* has a breathless and an almost endless garrulity of manner which has affinity with the narrative style of the narrator in *Kanthapura*. In both these stories we find that a conscious attempt has been made to adopt the rhythm of traditional Indian story telling. The author has also made an attempt to spice the stories with an Indian flavour though the language is English. This is evident in the diction and the similes that have been employed. Rao has made use of the rustic habit of using an appropriate adjective as a prefix to a proper name. Hence, in *Kanthapura* we find a host of peculiar nicknames such as "Corner-house Moorthy", "Front-house Akkamma," "Cardamom-field Ramachandra", "Jack-tree Tippa", "Trumpet Lingayya," "Pipe Ramayya", "Nose-scratching Nanjamma" and "Water-fall Venkamma" while in *Kanakapāla* we have

similar picturesque names like "Eight-Verandahed house Chowdayya," "Cardamom-field Venkatesha," "Plantation Subbayya" and "Vision Rangappa".

Some of the similes used are a clear indication of the use of the English language to convey an Indian sensibility.

1. "Kanakapāla knew the true from the false, as the rat knows  
the grain from the husk."

2. "Oh! to have a father with a heart pure as the morning lotus."

3. "Kanakapāla's old skin ..... shrivelled like the cast-off skin  
of a plantain."

**Kanakapāla** and **Kanthapura** have certain similarities to make the reader feel that the author had the former in his mind when constructing the frame-work of the latter. The river Himavathy finds mention in both the stories. It is on the banks of this river that the village Kashipura in **Kanakapāla** and the village of Kanthapura in the novel **Kanthapura** are situated. In both these works, Rao has employed the device of the narrator being an old woman from the village who pours out her experiences, beliefs and superstitions in a racy, breathless manner of story-telling typical of the Indian tradition.

In the story, **Companions**, we again have a villager narrating the legend of the juggler Moti Khan and the strange serpent who was a learned Brahmin in his previous birth. Here again is a tale of vision, curse, miracle, rebirth and salvation. It is a folk tale with a moral symbolism where Rao has made use of long sentences to suit the narrator who seems to be having so much to say in one breath that he does not pause to break up his sentences. Hence, a peculiar repetitive effect has been created by the use of the word **and** as in the following :

1. "But leaves rustled **and** serpents came forth from the left  
**and** the right, blue ones **and** white ones **and** red ones

*and* copper-coloured ones, long ones with short tails and short ones with bent tails *and* serpents dropped from tree-tops *and* rock-edges, serpents hissed on the river sands."

2. "Moti Khan married the devout daughter of Maulvi Mohammad Khan *and* he loved her well, *and* he settled down in Fatehpur Sikri *and* became the guardian of Sheikh Chisti's tomb."

We have *The Cow of the Barricades* which, again, begins as a folk tale about Gauri, the wonderful cow and her strange ways, Then we have the freedom struggle with Gauri leading the Indians and winning over the solidiers to the cause of Mahatma Gandhi. But she pays a high price and becomes a martyr when "the red man" shoots her through the head. Here again we notice the frequent use of *and* to give a repetitive quality to the description of the freedom struggle:—

"The Mahatma said : 'Don't buy their cloth.' *And* people did not buy their cloth. The Mahatma said : 'Don't pay their taxes.' *And* people did not pay the taxes. *And* people gathered, *and* bonfires were lit and processions were formed, *and* there were many men wounded and killed and many taken to prison."

In the story *Narsiga*, Rao presents a rustic orphan who gradually becomes aware of the freedom struggle and Gandhi. This, together with his knowledge of the ancient Indian epics and Puranas (mythology), conjure up in his mind the image of Gandhi as an incarnation of Rama, who, upon his release from prison, goes in the air with his wife, Sita

"in a flower-chariot drawn by sixteen steeds, each one more beautiful than the other. And they will fly through the air and the heavens will let fall a rain of flowers."

This Puranic strain of philosophy is also found later in *Kanthapura* where Mahatma Gandhi is described as the *avatar* (incarnation) of Rama who will free India (described as Sita) from the rule of the British (described as Ravana).

A point that becomes amply clear when one reads these stories is that the author has made an attempt to translate words and phrases from Kannada into English so as to catch the rhythm and the feel of rustic Kannada speech. The literal translation of Kannada idioms and phrases is an important stylistic feature of these stories which imbues them with a strong local flavour:

1. "Always the same Ramayana!" (It is always the same old story).
2. "Bow-legged Rangayya", "Squint Ramayya", "Fig-Tree House", "Old-well House."
3. "Throw me into a well and drink a good, hot seer of milk."
4. "May she have a hundred male issues."

One also observes that the imagery employed is a typically rural Indian imagery :

1. "The hut squat as a squern."
2. "Trees shaven like widows before their husbands' pyre."

Akkayya has been described

"pure as the jasmine in the temple garden,"

but now her face is

"wrinkled like a dry mango,"

and her legs are bent down like

"plantain barks."



We have a description of Hoskéré Nanjundiah's wrinkled dust-covered feet which look

"bluishgreen like cow dung;"

and upon hearing Ramu's refusal, his face goes

"grey as a plantain flower."

As the attention is shifted from the short stories to Rao's major works, one notices that Rao has more liberally employed all the devices that he had used in the short stories. The rustic Indian life, the Indian freedom struggle and the adaptation of Indian form and style to the English language become his main preoccupations in his first novel, *Kanthapura*.

The sleepy little village of *Kanthapura* and the changing village scene have been described with the minutest details so that the entire village with its omens and superstitions comes alive. Great care has been taken to describe the geographical location of *Kanthapura* with a temple dedicated to the Goddess Kanthapurishwari which is the centre of village life. With the village being divided into the Brahmin quarter, the potters' quarter, the weavers' quarter, the pariah quarter and the Sudra quarter, the reader is at once prepared to enter a caste-ridden Indian village where important agricultural activities are carried out according to appropriate religious rituals and people have immense faith in omens and superstitions. For any important activity the villagers invoke the blessings of the Goddess Kenchamma. They believe in such things as beating their knuckles upon the floor and naming the Holy Name when a wall-lizard clucks propitiously as it gives them peace. The coolies in the Skeffington Coffee Estate throw away the quinine pills given to them by the Sahib when malaria attacks because they have no faith in the Sahib's remedy. Rather, they consider tearing a piece of the sari fringe, putting into it a little rice, an areca nut and a three-piece bit, and hanging it securely to the roof of their hut to be far more efficacious.

Such are the ways of these villagers whose lives move at a snail's pace almost till they are in the grip of the Gandhian revolution. The initial reaction being unfavourable, it falls upon Moorthy to brainwash the rustic Indian mind by projecting Gandhi as a Hindu avatar. Throughout the novel Gandhi remains unseen but his presence is strongly felt.

As Rao himself says, he has made use of the narrative technique of the Indian Puranas in *Kanthapura*. He states his aim in the Foreword to *Kanthapura* :

"There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana* or legendary history, of its own. Some God or godlike hero passed by the village—Ram might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of a village I have tried to tell."

Hence it is that the reader finds a close correspondence between *Kanthapura* and the Puranas which are a combination of narration, philosophy and religious teaching done in a simple, flowing manner with an elaborate description of certain events and miracles. Going by the Foreword, Rao has, indeed, followed the style of a *Sthalapurana* in his opening description of the village of Kanthapura whose significance is emphasised by the hallowed presence of the village deity, Kenchamma. How she comes to reside in this village has been explained by an interesting legend. As most village deities, Kenchamma is a feminine presence who protects the villagers

"through famine and disease, death and despair."

She is indispensable as the entire life and activities of the village revolve around her benign presence. Equally sacred and revered by the Kanthapurans is the river Himavathy. Both Kenchamma and Himavathy have been described as living forces having miraculous powers and participating actively in the lives and destinies of the villagers just like the Puranic Gods and Goddesses. Just like the Puranas preaching the supremacy of their own deity, we have in **Kanthapura** the glorification of Gandhi through Moorthy, Rangamma and Ratna. Just as the Puranas lay emphasis on the doctrine of incarnation and describe the reason for the appearance of a certain avatar, **Kanthapura** idolises Mahatma Gandhi as the new avatar whose virtues are extolled and exploits described by the Harikathaman Jayaramachar in the traditional Puranic manner :

In the great heavens, Brahma, the self created one, was lying on his serpent, when the sage Valmiki entered, announced by the two doorkeepers. "Oh, learned sire, what brings you into this distant world?" asked Brahma, and, offering the sage a seat beside him, fell at his feet. "Rise up, O God of Gods! I have come to bring you sinister news. Far down on the earth you chose as your chief daughter Bharatha, the goddess of wisdom and well-being. You gave her the sage-loved Himalayas and the seven surging seas to the south, and you gave her the Ganges to meditate on .....But, O Brahma, .....you have forgotten us so long that men have come from across the seas and the oceans to trample on our wisdom and to spit on virtue itself..... O Brahma, deign to send us one of your gods so that he may incarnate himself on earth and bring back light and plenty to your enslaved daughter....."

"O sage", pronounced Brahma, "..... Siva himself will forthwith go and incarnate himself on the earth and free my

beloved daughter from her slavery. Pray seat yourself;.....”

And so when the sage was still partaking of the pleasures  
Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in  
Gujarat, a son such as the world had never beheld! As soon as  
he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like a kingdom  
of the sun, and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp  
the language of wisdom ..... And as he grew up..... men  
followed him, more and more men followed him, as they did  
Krishna the flute-player; and so he goes from village to village  
to slay the serpent of the foreign rule ..... he is a saint, the  
Mahatma, and even his enemies fall at his feet.

Besides, Rao has carried on his meaningful experiment to catch the flavour of Indian speech which he had already begun in his short stories. Achuakka, an old Brahmin widow of Kanthapura has been made the narrator of the whole story and the technique employed suits the manner of speaking of such a narrator. Long, flowing sentences have been used liberally to suggest a long and continuous outpouring by a garrulous narrator who is none else but a gossipy old rustic Indian woman. These long sentences, some of which constitute a whole paragraph, have been used to convey the hurried and breathless tempo of South Indian speech because **Kanthapura** is the story of a South Indian Village.

The device of repetition has been used to emphasize a certain point. For example :

“They say Rangamma is all for the Mahatma. We are all for the Mahatma. Pariah Rachanna's wife, Rachi, and Seethamma and Timmamma are all for the Mahatma. They say there are men in Bombay and men in Punjab, and men and women in Bombay and Bengal and Punjab who are all for the Mahatma. They say

the Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country and he will get us

Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma."

Throughout the novel we have Indian — particularly Kannada—phrases and idioms literally translated into English. This definitely lends an Indian flavour to the style. Even a casual reader of *Kanthapura* finds a profusion of "local colour" in the form of extensive borrowings from Kannada such as idioms and phrases literally translated into English, characteristic habits of speech, modes of address, greetings and prayers peculiar to the Kannada-speaking community.

So we come across expressions such as

1. "You are a traitor to your salt-givers;"
2. "Your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village;"
3. "a crow-and-sparrow story,"
4. "Why? go and ask the squirrel on the fence!"
5. "every squirrel has his day;"
6. "You forget it. But this stomach that has borne eight children cannot forget it."

Furthermore, homely similes that are strictly Indian, are found scattered throughout the novel. For example :

1. "The Venkamma plants herself like a banana-trunk in front of her."
2. "Rangamma stood by her helpless as a calf."

In *The Example of Raja Rao*, R. Parthasarathy states :

"The embedding of the structure of Kannada in English is done with such finesse as to be almost unnoticeable."<sup>1</sup>

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1. R. Parthasarathy, *The Example of Raja Rao in WORD AS MANTRA* p. 17

**Kanthapura** is a long oral tale in which other tales get interspersed with the key story. So the author begins them with oral tags such as

"Once upon a time,"

and

"This is how it all began."

Songs, prayers, proverbs and mythology are the other characteristics of the oral tradition which have been used to make it an oral narrative. One also notices that Rao invests his words with the power with which they are expressive of the thought process of an oral culture as thought occurs in rhythmic patterns with repetitions, utterances and proverbs.

**Kanthapura** is the tale of a peasant society in South India. By allocating space within this village to various castes and by the detailed description of social relationships which are interpersonal, Rao has successfully projected the outlook and tradition of this society which unites under the leadership of a young educated Brahmin, Moorthy, and participates in the Freedom Movement.

But, to express all this, Rao has made a unique attempt to nativize English. In his Foreword to **Kanthapura** he makes a revolutionary declaration when he says

"..... One has to convey in a language that is not one's own.

One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.....

The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our

English expression, .....We, in India, think quickly, we talk

quickly and when we move, we move quickly..... We have

neither punctuation nor the treacherous "ats" and "ons" to

bother us—we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows

episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling. I have tried to follow it myself in the story."

Therefore, with a narrative style adhering to the traditional Indian method of story telling, *Kanthapura* is a bold experiment by Raja Rao.

The narrative structure can be described as being mythic and realistic at the same time. In *Kanthapura* his endeavour has been to integrate into his consciousness of the past tradition his present experience in time. This explains the use of a narrative form that is a mingling of myth and realism. A typical Indian archetype is the incarnation of God as the saviour of people in distress. Rao has used this idea in *Kanthapura* where Mahatma Gandhi is conceived as an incarnation of God who is born to put an end to the suffering of the Indian people under the British rule. His life and deeds have been described as bearing a close proximity to those of Lord Krishna, the Divine rescuer. The village bard sings the Mahatma's praises and the Kanthapurans regard him as "mighty and God-beaming". Hence his words repeated by Moorthy, his devotee, have the force of a divine edict and the objectives of economic self-sufficiency and employment become surrounded by a kind of transcendental halo.

Rao has conformed to the traditional form of the novel in that the exposition introduces the place, the main characters and the historical background. Then there is a frequent shuttling back and forth in time. One can notice this in the frequent shifts in chronology in the presentation of the principal character, Moorthy. The novel begins in the middle of his life and the past is evoked through various allusions. Thus Moorthy's portrait has been sketched with such details of his past which help the reader to understand him in the present. The presentation of these details in isolated emphasis on each occasion and not in a strict sequence has

been done to create the most vivid effect in a particular situation. The presentation of Rangamma and Bhatta has been done with the same conscious manipulation of chronology.

Not only the physical realities but also the ethos of this archaic rustic life is presented by the narrative form so that we have the detailed description of the setting of the village, the descriptions of the outbreak of the monsoon, the Kartika festival of lights, the planting ceremony and the celebration of the glory of Kenchamma, the presiding village deity. In the early pages of *Kanthapura* we have a wealth of concrete details about the characters, their behaviour and activities so that the reader is plunged into the living world of a Kannada village.

A first-person narrator, a feature of modern fiction, which Rao has adapted in this novel is probably because a heightened realism and closer intimacy with the reader can be established by a first-person narrator who is also a participant in the action. So he has introduced an old village grandmother as the narrator who builds up a personal and intimate relationship with the reader by directly addressing him and making him enter as well as participate in the action of the fictional world.

An important feature is the use of verbs conveying a sense of motion.

[About this Esha Dey observes that Rao has made use of kinetic images which help in the evocation of an atmosphere. Therefore we come across verbs such as *creak, whine, bleat, blubber, clashing, rattling, snorts, sway, flutter, churns, bucks, spits forward, whorling, winnowing*, etc. which convey a sense of motion. Throughout the novel we find the author attempting to imitate a sensuous apprehension of the external world by deliberately using onomatopoeia such as : the rain *patters*, the water *churns, swirls*, bamboos and gates *creak*, birds *screech*, autumn leaves *crunch*, fire *crackles*, wings *flap, pat-pat-pat* of rain. The reader also finds an abundance of alliteration and assonance : *sumptuous smell of cardamoms, grinned and grit, shimmer and shake, a*



*fuss and a flutter, hair and home, bright and benign and slipping seeking feet.]]<sup>1</sup>*

Through these various stylistic forms Rao has tried to create a total design in which he has narrated the experience of Indian nationalism of a remote Indian village which was embedded in its age-old beliefs and superstitions but was inspired by the Gandhian ideology to join the Indian freedom struggle.

Now taking up for study *The Serpent and the Rope*, one finds it to be a complex work by Rao in which he has skilfully woven together a few themes, one leading to the other. Overall, it is the tragic story of a marriage of two individuals belonging to different socio-cultural backgrounds who finally drift apart. They are Ramaswamy, an Indian, representing the East and Madeleine, a French, representing the West. In other words, it is the tale of an East-West encounter, a major preoccupation of Rao and his contemporary Indian writers.

Ramaswamy, the hero, is a young, educated Indian intellectual. Like most Indians of that time, Rao's hero hopes to return to India, his home, with his European wife after the completion of his doctorate and take up a professor's job at an Indian university. But fortune has it otherwise. From the beginning their marriage runs into rough waters as they lose their first-born child. This is followed by Ramaswamy's return to India to settle affairs at home upon receiving news about his father's critical condition.

To the discerning reader this home-coming has been used by Rao to bring about some changes in the hero's attitude. He becomes introspective and strongly aware of his roots in India. His family ties get strengthened as he now realises that he has become the head of the family and many responsibilities devolve upon him. The author makes his sensitive mind register profoundly the glimpses of

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1. As explained by Esha Dey in *The Novels of Raja Rao*, p. 53

Indian womanhood which he gets a chance to observe. He first of all notices how his recently widowed young stepmother suddenly grows in mental and moral stature after her pilgrimage from which she returns "with natural dignity." This, he realises, has been due to her suffering at the loss of her husband as well as to her simple and unquestioning faith in her religion and the ways of her ancestors. The second experience for him is a complex one concerning his younger sister Saroja who suddenly seems to have ripened into womanhood. He is

"intoxicated with Saroja's presence, like a deer could be before  
a waterfall, or an elephant before a mountain peak."

Ramaswamy's third experience of Indian womanhood is of vital importance as it changes the future course of events. It is his first encounter with Savithri which, though insignificant momentarily, leads on to future meetings which have such a great impact on his life as he could not realize when he first met her. Though he dislikes her at their first meeting because she is "too modern," he comes to realize upon subsequent meetings that, beneath her ultra modernism, she has a spirit which resembles his own — an Indian spirit to the core.

Hence, when Ramaswamy returns to Madeleine, he has been altered by this experience of Indian womanhood which holds a greater attraction for him. To the sensitive reader this could be Rao's tribute to Indian womanhood.

Ramaswamy returns with a gift for Madeleine—two little toe-rings which belonged to his mother and which his step mother has given to him as her blessing to her daughter-in-law. This heirloom is of great significance to Ramaswamy as it is going to help him at last make Madeleine his own. But he has come back to her a different man. Psychologically he has become distanced from her so that there is no warmth in their reunion and Madeleine recounts later that when she kissed him

"it was like kissing a serpent or the body of death."

Both of them become conscious of the growing rift and seek temporary fulfilment in sex. But as soon as Ramaswamy meets Savithri, first in France and then at Cambridge, certain chords are struck resulting in a strong mutual attraction. He feels no qualms of conscience when he unites with Savithri in a symbolic ritual marriage and pushes “the toe-rings on to her second toes.”

Raja Rao has made an elaborate comparison between the Ramaswamy-Madeleine and the Ramaswamy- Savithri relationship in a letter to M. K. Naik to explain his views about man-woman relationship in the West as against the man-woman relationship in India :

Man finds life natural with a woman, that is human destiny. But a woman can only find her God through man. But the “modern woman” thinks she can reach the ultimate directly..... This is heresy..... Denis de Rougemont's famous book *Passion and Society* .... influenced me to think seriously of the problem. Modern love, according to de Rougemont, is a heresy..... beginning in the Europe of the 13th and 14th centuries. Revolution too, so History tells us, is heresy—in the sense that revolution (like the Cathar or Albigensian revolt against Catholic *dharma*) is beautiful and noble like modern love, yet is heretical. Tradition is wisdom. And Wisdom (that is Tradition) as History is anti-history. Hence India refused to have history—just as Sita accepted Rama (and all his doings) and did not revolt against her “cruel” husband. Thus marriage as history (Rama-Madeleine) fails, but love as Savithri-Rama succeeds, for in one Madeleine seeks her own God but Savithri her Rama (through whom she sees the whole experience and beyond). Love may or may not have any physical expression—for love as *Prema* [platonic love] transcends the body. The

true woman of Rama therefore is Savithri, even though she is married to his friend Pratap.....The West is Romantic, and as such historical. .... Hence the Western man and woman's love for love, as passion, as attraction of the other, etc. India is classical, that is traditional, in which the woman, being in her true and own place, inherits the world. (as queen, hence the coronation of the Queen of England, etc.) The man then must resolutely turn away to the Absolute. The man who seeks the pilgrim of the Absolute, is a lonely man, ever lonely.....<sup>1</sup>

In order to express this view, Rao brings about a dissolution of the marriage of Ramaswamy and Madeleine by giving them different individual concepts about marriage. He thereby leads us to reflections on the theme of true marriage and the roles that man and woman have to play in it. Throughout the novel one finds the hero reflecting on his relations with the various women who have influenced his life as mother, sister, wife and beloved. Rao has, infact, used Ramaswamy to illustrate his own view and that of the average Indian about womanhood. To the Western reader it becomes amply evident that the Indian attitude is guided by the dominance of the feminine principle. This attitude could also be rightly called a reflection of the predominance of the feminine principle in the Hindu religion. Ramaswamy significantly remarks :

"The woman needs our worship for her fulfilment, for in worshipping her we know the world and annihilate it, absorbing it into ourself."

Therefore, true marriage, for him, is a step towards self-realization. It is, he feels, a mating of two souls leading an individual to the ultimate union with God.

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1. M. K. Naik, *Raja Rao*, p. 84-85.

Thus Rao has used the theme of true marriage as a launching pad for the larger and penultimate theme of the novel viz. the quest for self-knowledge. Ramaswamy's love for Savithri becomes the stepping stone for his ultimate self-realization or the realization of the Truth. Ramaswamy tries to progress towards his true "Indian" identity through his relationship with women. The mingling of love and quest has been brought about to reveal to the hero that ultimate realization is to be found nowhere but at the feet of the **Guru**. In the end when most of his worldly ties are cut off, the hero realizes the futility of worldly life and develops a strange longing which may be better described as a quest for the Truth or Absolute. Ramaswamy's quest ends at the feet of his **Guru** which is in keeping with the Indian spiritual tradition which accords the **Guru** the highest seat in a man's search for truth.

Through the hero, Ramaswamy, Rao has stated his own understanding of both India and Europe. The dialogues between Ramaswamy and the various characters have been initiated to illustrate the Indian and Western attitudes, values and religious thought systems. The hero expresses Rao's own views when he becomes highly critical of modern India aping the West and states that his India

"is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea,  
a metaphysic.....My India I carried wheresoever I went;"

and again

"India is the kingdom of God, and it is within you. India is  
wheresoever you see, hear, touch, taste, smell."

The novel is also a statement about what India means to an expatriate Hindu Brahmin who feels a kind of nostalgia :

".....the Ganges was an inner truth to me, an assurance,  
the origin and end of my Brahminic tradition. I would go back to

India for the Ganges and for the deodars of the Himalayas,  
..... I would go back to India, for the India was my breath,  
my only sweetness, gentle and wise, she was my mother."

In other words, for any expatriate Indian, it is difficult to wipe out the reality that India is both a metaphysical and geographical entity which has preserved its culture despite the ravages of time.

***The Serpent and the Rope***, being metaphysical in the treatment of the theme, has banked upon Rao's use of Sanskritic English probably because Sanskrit was used in the ancient religious texts by Indians to express profoundly their philosophical speculations. The author has skilfully woven into the story Sanskrit quotations in the original together with English translations.

Philosophy forms an integral part of the novel and one finds the novel interspersed with philosophical debates as in the Upanishads and the Puranas. The novel interprets the Advaita Vedantic philosophy of Sankaracharya. Ramaswamy, the hero and narrator, is an educated South Indian Brahmin who can recite with ease verses from Sanskrit, English and French. Brought up in the ancient Brahminic tradition of South India, he is quite comfortable in philosophic discourses. The conversations often represent the Upanishadic samvadas.

The title and the epigraph of the novel are both symbolic. As M. K. Naik in his book ***Raja Rao*** states :

"..... the rope in the title and the sea in the epigraph standing for the ultimate reality; the serpent representing illusion, and the waves in the epigraph the individual soul which ultimately discovers that it is nothing but the ultimate reality itself. This Advaitic doctrine of the identity of ***Jiva*** (the individual soul) and Siva forms ..... the very basis of the novel."<sup>1</sup>

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1. M. K. Naik, ***Raja Rao***, p. 100.

Rao has portrayed woman not as an impediment but as a means of achieving self-realization. The name Savithri has a symbolic significance for the Hindus. Firstly, it is the name of the Vedic solar deity and signifies the stimulating activity of the sun. Secondly, it is the name of the heroine in one of the stories in the *Mahabharata*. This Savithri, a princess, marries Satyavan, a prince, who is destined to live but one more year after marriage. On the fatal day, Yama, the God of death, takes away the soul of Satyavan. But Savithri follows him, refuses various boons and only insists on having her husband restored back to life. Yama relents but has to give in to Savithri's wishes and Satyavan gets back life. Thus, Savithri symbolizes wifely devotion.

The Savithri myth is important in the novel because Ramaswamy's beloved, Savithri, too plays a stimulating life-giving role in his life.

The ritual marriage between Ramaswamy and Savithri is also symbolic as it signifies the fact that Ramaswamy's union with Savithri is the marriage of the masculine and feminine principles leading to self-realization and illuminating the path of the quest for the Truth.

In keeping with the theme of an East-West encounter, Rao has successfully blended Indian and Western forms of story telling. As told to M. K. Naik, he had Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* in his mind while writing *The Serpent and the Rope*.

In keeping with Rilke's book, Rao has made his story an autobiography of its hero, Ramaswamy. The story is, in its later stage, a series of reflections on subjects such as love, marriage and the quest for the Absolute. This autobiographical method is a typically Western device. But the Indian sensibility comes alive through the use of Sanskrit verses, the Upanishadic kind of discourses and the Vedantic philosophy. Various Indian mythical characters such as Savithri, Sage Yagnavalkya have been used with great symbolic significance.

We have long poetic descriptions of nature and holy places as is characteristic of our Puranas. There are evocative pictures of the Ganga, the Himalaya and Benaras.

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rao has dealt with the religious philosophies of Buddhism and Catholicism but declared the victory of Advaita Vedantism at the end.

The hero freely draws upon Sanskrit, French, Italian and Hindi. His diction abounds in Latin and French words. Rao has made an attempt to recapture the rhythms of Sanskrit in English to adapt it to the personality of the protagonist who is also the narrator.

Throughout the novel one finds the use of the hyphenated language which serves two significant purposes. Firstly, it indicates a break in the thought process. Secondly, it is a powerful device suggesting the to-and-fro movement of a thought. Indian idioms, phraseology and proverbs translated into English bring an Indian flavour as in *Kanthapura*. We again have such examples as :

1. "You can't stitch it (Tante Zoubie's tongue) with a gunnybag needle;"
2. "For a *Shiva's lip* (a flower) of the courtyard .... Shiva's head is the Kailas. And for a woman the sacred feet of her husband be paradise."

Regarding the use of word groups, we have this opinion :

A word-group which occurs in the novel in a significant manner is the *eighteen aggregates*. The word-group has Buddhist associations and Lezo refers to it as an intellectual concept. The words serve a different purpose when they occur in the dialogue between Rama and Madeleine; they are commentaries



..... on a poignant human situation. The marriage between Rama and Madeleine has failed and the situation is conveyed through these words :

'Why did you come ?'

'To see you'

'You cannot see anything but the eighteen aggregates.'

'But eighteen aggregates can see eighteen aggregates,' I said laughing. 'Then it is no concern of mine,' she said, and started counting her beads ..... ***Eighteen aggregates*** convey information about the present state of Madeline, the futility and barrenness of the marriage between Rama and Madeleine, the irony contained in Rama's voice.<sup>1</sup>

As regards the experiment with language and theme, ***The Serpent and the Rope*** is unique in its sensitive handling of the aspects of family, women, marriage, pilgrimage and Vedantic philosophy, all of which contribute significantly to the exposition of the central theme of an East-West confrontation.

The technical devices adopted in the narration are the use of a first person narrator protagonist, the hero's diary and the technique of introducing his characters by a descriptive paragraph about the physical or moral identity of an individual.

An analysis of the theme of ***The Serpent and the Rope*** reveals that a parallel scheme of an intellectual thesis has been incorporated into the narrative structure to express two opposed views, the Vedantic and the materialistic. The author has created an opportunity to state that the Vedantic i.e., Indian and the

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1. Baidya Nath Prasad, ***The Language of Raja Rao's THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE*** in ***Indian Writing in English*** ed. Krishna Nandan Sinha.

materialistic i.e., Western are the only two logical attitudes towards the world. While the Vedantic view identifies the self as the Ultimate Reality and the empirical world as only an appearance, the materialistic view states the empirical world to be the only reality. The narrative form is a mixed one which combines realism in the form of a flowing interior monologue with an intellectual speculation. The idea of linking idea to life gives rise to the autobiographical form of writing. The autobiographical mode has been used by Rao to justify the hero's subjective apprehension of reality. Rao has evoked an atmosphere in-keeping with the mood of the major character.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* is another metaphysical novel by Rao in which he takes up the theme of the metaphysical quest from the point at which Ramaswamy's story ends in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Rao has called it

"a metaphysical comedy"

and

"a book of prayer".

But it may be called a strange prayer in which one finds a mixture of fact and fantasy, mysticism and materialism in an incoherent whole. It is a funny story about a clerk, Ramakrishna Pai, who is a Saraswath Brahmin with a wife and two children, his extramarital relations with Shantha who is a Nair school teacher and Govindan Nair, a clerk in the local ration office who is a jovial person of large built with a definite philosophy of life which forms the central theme of the novel.

Rao has created the character of Govindan Nair to resolve the quest which had been left unresolved in *The Serpent and the Rope*. The author takes the *Guru* to represent divine wisdom and love. In *The Cat and Shakespeare* Rao has gone a step further. Whereas the hero in *The Serpent and the Rope* had finally decided to throw himself at the feet of his *Guru*, Pai in *The Cat and*

**Shakespeare** is already blessed by a **Guru** i.e., Govindan Nair who initiates him completely to his philosophy by the end of the narrative.

Nair's symbols of the cat and the kitten are taken from the non-dualistic philosophy of Ramanuja, a celebrated interpreter of Vedanta in the eleventh century who laid stress on the path of love and devotion (**Bhakti Yoga**) in order to realize the Ultimate Reality. Ramanuja's doctrine of **prapatti** or self-surrender has been explained by Rao in this novel. Hence, while one finds Sankara's **Jnana Yoga** or the path of knowledge being explained in **The Serpent and the Rope**, it is Ramanuja's **Bhakti Yoga** which is well illustrated in **The Cat and Shakespeare**.

The cat in **The Cat and Shakespeare** may also be explained as belonging to the world of the Indian beast fables because it carries with it a cloud of symbolic glory. The Indian Puranas are characterised by parables and fables. **The Cat and Shakespeare** could also be called a parable of divine grace.

Symbols control the total form of the narrative to make it a "metaphysical comedy." Ordinary human experiences are charged with a symbolic meaning and the invisible force of the transcendental are evident in almost all the situations appearing in this novel.

Ramakrishna Pai is just an average human being with a mundane aspiration to have his own house where he can live with his woman and child. But Rao makes this house the symbol of the earthly existence of a soul that fundamentally belongs to the Divine. So his small white house has "an ochre band on it—almost as on a temple" for the ochre colour is traditionally associated with spirituality in India. Pai constantly thinks of extending the house upwards by adding more storeys. This vertical progress symbolises the mind's upliftment from the ordinary to the extraordinary which is the Ultimate Reality. Pai's little house continually echoing with the sound of the waves from the sea is a constant reminder of the

divine creation. His mistress, Shantha, represents, in human form, the creative aspect of the Supreme as she symbolises the Divine creator in her role as a mother.

Another symbol used is the *bilva* tree, sacred to *Shiva*. Rao elevates it to the position of the cosmic tree symbolising birth, growth, death and regeneration. The falling of the leaves from the tree presents salvation to Pai and this tree becomes an earthly existence of Divine significance, becoming a constant reminder to him of the possibility of the descent of the grace.

Rao has made use of private symbols to explain certain philosophies such as *karma* and non-duality. The ration shop ruled by the great scales is an image used by him to show that the human world is subjected to evaluation according to our action which is our *karma* predestined from previous births. At a ration shop everybody gets his quota according to the colour of his card and the reward or punishment that each one of us gets according to his *karma* is the ration apportioned to him on this earth. Hence

"we all live on ration,"

and

"life is a ration shop."

Another private symbol used by Rao is *Shakespeare*. Govindan Nair is full of Shakespeare. He works up the word 'ego' to drive home man's limitation as that of Hamlet when he extols his own virtues before Horatio. Rao has adapted Shakespeare to his own needs. We notice that constructions like

'she seemed more in prayer than in sorrow'

and

'How are you, my lord and liege?'

'Better than if the kingdom were at peace and no wars  
anywhere.'

have a syntax and vocabulary that is Shakespearean.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* contains some Upanishadic kind of passages. We find Shantha actually quoting from the sage Yagnavalkya. Two other examples are the dialogue between Govindan Nair and Lakshmi in the brothel and the conversation between Pai and Usha after Sridhar's death. Nair's frequent philosophical speculations are Upanishadic in nature.

Rao has employed a simple and direct narrative style in this novel. By the use of Indian vocabulary and simile he has infused local colour into this work. Expletives like

"Ay ya yo yo"

and "chee-chee"

and similes such as

"I am empty as a tamarind seed;" "the name boards of the  
advocates look like coconuts on a tree;" "man has a heart white  
as a rice pod but he makes it dark as a lentil pod;"

are found scattered throughout.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* is unlike the conventional novel in that it has a series of "happenings" which actually take place as "non-happenings". Past, present and future get mixed up to leave the reader somewhat baffled as to what precisely happens. There appears to be hardly any logical interaction between various happenings as also in the relationships between the characters. By an intellectual analysis that is more meditative and mystic yet is a constant source of humour, the author brings about a skilful mingling of the sublime and the grotesque, making it the basic principle operating throughout the novel. This is a unique technique adopted from surrealism where the surreal lies in the consistent denial of rationality with the aid of intelligent analysis with a special kind of humour.

Everything has been made an object of gentle laughter. Everything has been scoffed at, whether it is a disgusting disease like an attack of bubos, or the pathetic death of a child, or the arrest and trial of Govindan Nair. Thus, humour is almost always arising out of what would be normally regarded as painful for human beings such as disease, death or conflict with the law. In each instance humour is provided as a means to absolve the content of human suffering and deflate the human sorrow by an intellectual frame of reference where Rao's metaphysics takes the human situation completely under control. To give one example, we have the description of the death of Sridhar, Nair's son. Here Death is said to have spoilt the courtyard

"with flower beds of roses"

and Dr. Pillai has been described as a capable doctor who

"walked out of the house efficiently"

with his Gladstone bag which was very knowledgeable containing

"mysterious instruments that spoke."

Following the description of Sridhar's death is a dialogue between Pai and Usha about some general things like life, death and marriage in which Nair tells his daughter the Vedantic truth that real life is

"where no flames can burn."

Rao has followed this narrative pattern throughout the novel whereby a real human situation is rendered unreal through humour and a witty play of metaphysics. Thus in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Rao has treated suffering as unreal through a special variety of humour whereby he uses a higher intelligence to break the bond with rationality. This is a surreal technique employed by Rao where the emphasis is on irrationality and everything seems possible.

The language of *The Cat and Shakespeare* is simple as compared to the language of Rao's earlier works. He has, at times, purposely omitted the particularizing article or the possessive pronoun in an attempt to suggest the symbolic universal nature of the individual characters who, while inhabiting a fictional world, are illustrative of the true Reality. For example :

1. And Shantha is not just a woman, she is woman."
2. "She (Usha) is my child. She is not merely that. She is child."

This is a structural device used by Rao to indicate that the particular story reflects the universal human condition.

One further notices the frequent use of the present tense in the narration of events in this novel which could be pointed out as a breakaway from the traditional. In the traditional form the fictional reality may be built on the past tense and there may be constant authorial intrusion in the form of the present tense. This is the style adopted by Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope* where he has used the past tense to present the fictional reality i.e., the story of Ramaswamy and Madeleine while the present tense has been used to present a general truth. In *The Cat and Shakespeare* the use of the present tense helps in making the form non-realistic and endowing the fictional world with a dream-like quality. The use of the present tense also helps the reader in participating in the happenings rather than distance him from the narrative.

Nair's constant jokes make the fusion of the sublime and the grotesque so natural in utterances like

"God is a ledgerkeeper"

interested not in the morality of profit and loss, but in Truth—

"in the correct maintenance of the accounts."

Death is the

"clock tower of the Secretariat, it chimes time,"

and

"like the office peon carrying a slip from some visitor to the boss, destiny brings the British bubo to Pai."

In all of these one finds the emphasis on the mundane.

It may be marked, therefore, that by these various stylistic devices, Rao has presented a story in an allegorical mode with all the symbolism required to convey the central theme which is the quest for the Ultimate Reality. In ***The Cat and Shakespeare***, Rao concludes this quest as a philosopher-novelist by using a language that is simple yet possesses many layers of thought.

The structure of ***The Cat and Shakespeare*** is based on an individual apprehension of Truth. Rao has skillfully presented his concept of man-woman relationship, of marriage, the traditional symbolism of the garden, his personal symbol of the clock, etc. The fusion of the real and the ideal, the mundane and the sublime has been brought about with great care to make ***The Cat and Shakespeare*** essentially a novel written in an allegorical style which is a marked difference from Rao's previous works. The synthesis between orthodox values and humanism is achieved by presenting both in symbolic patterns, some traditional and others personal. Both Cat and Shakespeare are meant to suggest far more than the normal connotation can logically conceive of. Technique becomes a matter of utmost importance in this novel as it has been used to present in a coherent whole a synthesis based on the rejection of logic. In the process it has developed into a unique technique, mixing dream and reality. In rejecting rationality ***The Cat and Shakespeare*** appears to discard the traditional form of the novel and anticipate the post-modernist fiction.



***Comrade Kirillov*** by Raja Rao appears to be a non-plot in its flat succession of events which do not rise to a climax to be followed by a purgation in emotions. ***Comrade Kirillov*** is perceptibly marked into different segments which are separated from each other and unfolded in succession.

The first two sections appear to be exactly parallel as each narrates the biography of Padmanabha Iyer, a South Indian Brahmin (like Rao and his heroes), in the third person. The narrator is Rama who, like Rao, is

“a Gandhian, and a Vedantin and an Indian.”

In each section one finds the narration leading to a focus on an ideological crisis presented as a dialogue between Padmanabha, called Kirillov, and Rama.

The first section unfolds details, about Padmanabha's noble birth, Westernized education, disgust with modern India and Hindu orthodoxy, a temporary frustrating experience with Theosophy and his final choice of Communism. It is the Stalin regime when Rama meets Padmanabha and wants him, as an Indian, to join in the protest against the Moscow trials. But Padmanabha refuses, justifying the Party's stand.

The second section deals with Padmanabha's slow and painstaking growth to his emergence as a good Communist who firmly supports the Party's policy to oppose Gandhi's call for nationalist agitation against the British in 1942. Despite the victory of the Gandhian movement, Padmanabha continues to be a Communist. His life style, however, has always been that of an orthodox South Indian Brahmin despite his marriage to Irene, a Czech Communist who dies in childbirth leaving him a son, Kamal.

The third section presents Padmanabha from his wife's point of view. Her entries in her diary reveal the latent Indianness of Padmanabha which appears to be not only his orthodox life style or his sentimental adoration of Gandhi, but his

Brahminic knowledge of Sanskrit. It is this Indianness which becomes the main attraction of P. to Irene but later spells the doom of their marriage. Her death in childbirth seems inevitable following the entry,

"I shall never go to India".

In the last section, Padmanabha disappears behind the impenetrable Communist curtain. But India wins because Kamal, growing up with Indian grandparents, is placed by the narrator Rama in the temple of Kanyakumari where he finds India embodied in Parvati, as an eternal virgin waiting for her bridgroom, Shiva.

By calling Padmanabha Kirillov, Rao makes it obvious that Communism can mean only suicide for an Indian. Hence the pen used by Padmanabha to write his Communist thesis is compared to a revolver.

An interesting and important point to note is that Rao's concept of India has a remarkable resemblance with Dostoevsky's idea of Russia. Rao makes a constant reference to Shatov so that one may conclude that in his innate love for India and a certain kind of orthodox external display of Indianness (the mechanical repetition of Sanskrit slokas, vegetarianism, etc.), Padmanabha is equal to Shatov whose fervent love of Russia and orthodoxy have been upheld by Dostoevsky. One finds Dostoevsky considering Russia, orthodoxy and Christianity as a composite which is as absolute as the Holy Trinity. It is this indissoluble bond which forms the main theme of Dostoevsky's whole literary inspiration which is specifically revealed in *The Possessed*. Critics find Rao's Indian identity inextricably bound with orthodoxy and the Advaita Vedanta, a particular branch of Hindu philosophy. Hence the trinity of India-orthodoxy-Vedanta form the main theme of Rao's entire creative effort.

The first two sections of the novel are marked by a tone of an incessant chatter which often rises to a feverish peak in the long speeches of Padmanabha, the Communist, and Rama, the Gandhian.

In *Comrade Kirillov* we find a juxtaposition of two voices. Through Padmanabha, Rao presents the typical Communist viewpoint with which he himself once sympathized. But as an orthodox Brahmin—which he later became—he reacts to it and it is this reaction which seeks to determine the tone of the text. Thus the two voices belong to the different selves of the author and offer constant opposition to each other.

Rao has throughout been a supporter of orthodoxy. This is evident in *The Serpent and the Rope* where the hero, Ramaswamy, supports the Roman Catholic Church. In *Comrade Kirillov* he makes Padmanabha admire Stalin as the embodiment of orthodoxy and denounce Trotsky as a heretic.

In *Comrade Kirillov*, the volley of “Indian” attack is directed at the absence of God in Communism. Padmanabha in his destructive “spiderweb,” “prison-cell” logic expounds,

“Metaphysical enquiry, I now say is due to rachitism—it is like a disease caused by vitamin deficiency. God is the fiction of the lazy.”

The cynicism is conveyed by words of negative connotation such as *disease*, *deficiency*, *fiction* (in the sense of mere untruth) and *lazy*. For the Communist God is negation. For the Indian, on the other hand, it is Communism that is annihilation.

Padmanabha, the Communist Brahmin, applies the abstruse theory of *Sphota* “the central word-principle” to assess a “Marxist classic” namely Stalin's congratulatory telegram to Hitler on the conquest of Poland. It goes thus :

“The word reduced to its sound-value, then to its vibratory value, then finally to its etheric (*akashic* is the Sanscrit for it) structural value is reduced to exact nothingness. It is this universal nothingness that makes all permutations possible. *In modern language we would say* all objects are

ultimately reducible *to the electromagnetic field* and sound and object being one, they can be interpreted in terms of the wave equivalents, etc. Marxism is a science. A set of human, vocal vibrations—and in this case teleprinted probably—only produce the required physico-chemical transformation of the auditive and cerebral mechanisms, and produce a recognisable sound effect. Then the word is born. Stalin's congratulating Hitler could be reduced by sheer scientific computation to form some seventeen hundred wave components. Hitler is pleased. Stalin gets his time. That is Marxism. Hitler's message is physico-chemical vibration in ether."

If we look at the sheer content of this passage, it strikes us as a violent and irrational yoking together of concepts belonging to different spheres and different levels of human knowledge—a metaphysical theory and a physical concept. One notices a relative absence of connectives which mark the logical development of thought. It is perhaps indicative of Rao's desire to impose his views, arrived at without logic, on his readers.

This so-called Brahmin-Marxist presentation of language maintains absolute silence regarding the meaning of the telegram in the human context of history—that a Communist power has upheld an imperialist aggression. The irrational combination of *Sphota* and Physics reduces language to a lifeless structure of formal components entirely devoid of human content. The reader is left in confusion as to the author's intention in presenting a statement which is nothing but some physico-chemical vibrations. It appears to be a deliberate attack against logic.

Let us consider the description of Padmanabha's wife, Irene. Her womanhood has been presented in pathological terms in which the dominating factor is the red colour—the colour of the Communist Party.

"She had the red blood, the red hair, the passionate index  
finger, and dialectics had drained her lust into irate channels."

The creation of a new life for Irene and Padmanabha has therefore no emotional background but just a victory of India in abstraction :

"Kirillov even meditated, in expiation, upon the birth of a child—  
he would now have a child, they would have a boy, and he  
would be an Indian."

Human characters are thus found to be subordinate to objects and abstractions in ***Comrade Kirillov***. The author draws detailed attention to Padmanabha's bare surroundings such as the spare kitchen without even a glass and the lone piece of cheese, and lifeless items such as Kirillov's dress, his pants, trousers, shirts, coat, shoes and socks. Moreover, Kirillov's necktie is emphasized upon so much by the author that the reader is led to believe that in Kirillov's emotional life the necktie has an inexplicable value. Padmanabha treats it more like a human companion. In front of the narrator Rama he adjusts

"the curve of his slightly distended necktie, it was as though he  
were turning to his wife and saying. "Hello, dear, what is this?"

Again, when he victoriously expounds the Communist standpoint, he does not look to Irene, his wife, but seeks assurance in the necktie which

"received its pappings and it hissed and curled in ritual  
approval."

This object is Padmanabha's

"boon companion, his poetry, his sole possession."

The value attached to this necktie becomes evident in these lines :

"Kirillov's real name was Padmanabha Iyer, but his necktie had  
such praterplusparenthetical curve, as though much concrete

philosophy had gone into its making, and it revealed a soul so ambivalent that I could not gaze on its self-aware turpitudes without human compassion."

The reader seems a bit unsettled by this object revealing "a soul" and containing "some concrete philosophy". But this obsession with a few objects may be explained away as a characteristic feature of the anti-novel.

However, the climax of the novel is revealed in the Indianness which is laid bare to the readers in a fabular ending as the legend of the Eternal Virgin which Kamal, the son of Irene and Padmanabha, finds in the temple of Kanyakumari in South India. We are told that India is like Parvati who is deified as the Kanyakumari forever awaiting her indifferent bridegroom, Shiva, who, lost in meditation, fails to come at the auspicious hour of marriage. Rao's Shiva might be the orthodox Brahmin for whom India, like Parvati, stands deified in the temple as Kanayakumari — something abstract, cold, formal and remote like the stone idol.

Taken as a whole the novel consists of the satiric portrayal of the Communist self of Padmanabha, the sentimental identification with the Brahmin who is scholarly and also a Gandhian and, in the end, a romantic idealization in the legend of Kanyakumari. Therefore, *Comrade Kirillov*, as we see, is not a fiction in the traditional sense but a symbolic presentation of self-criticism by Rao.

*The Chessmaster and His Moves* may be termed as a vast mosaic of narration, reminiscences, confession, allusions and above all "cogitation". These are found to revolve round a central theme which is the protagonist's quest for a lost age through encounters with men, women and himself.

The human situation involves Sivaram Sastri, a Tamil Brahmin, engaged in combining metaphysics with mathematics (supposedly following the famous Indian mathematician S. Ramanujan), Suzanne(S) a French actress of classical comedies who is also spiritually inclined, Jayalakshmi (J) a rich North Indian princess and an

orthodox woman, surrounded by minor characters like Siva's friends, the sensual Jean-Pierre, his wife Mireille, the Jew linguist Michel who has survived the Nazi concentration camp, and Siva's sister Uma who is an unhappily married average Hindu middleclass woman.

The framework of this novel seems to be an obvious repetition of that of *The Serpent and the Rope*. Makarand Paranjape puts it thus:

".....the philosophical positions in *The Chessmaster* are more clearly defined and more neatly expressed. Not only are the thematic preoccupations similar, they are carried out by similar characters in both novels. Hence we can propose the following schema :

| <i>The Serpent and the Rope</i> | → | <i>The Chessmaster</i> |
|---------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Ramaswamy                       |   | Sivarama Sastri        |
| Madeleine                       |   | Suzanne                |
| Savithri                        |   | Jayalakshmi            |
| Savithri's husband              |   | Jaya's husband         |
| Pratap                          |   | Surrendar              |
| Anand (Savithri's brother)      |   | Raja Ashok             |
| Saroja                          |   | Uma                    |
| Subramanya Sastri               |   | Ramachandra Iyer       |
| Catherine                       |   | Mireille               |
| Lakshmi                         |   | Rati                   |
| Grandfather                     |   | Father                 |
| Tante Zoubie                    |   | Madame X               |
| Georgias                        |   | Michel                 |
| Lezo                            |   | Jean Pierre            |

"The arrow mark indicates that the latter character has evolved from the former; sometimes the resemblances are so pronounced as to make them almost identical, while at the other end of the spectrum, as with Anand turning into Ashok, the former is merely a hint. In all cases, there is a strong relationship, either in the traits of the two that make up the set or in their functions in the narrative. Not just the central characters, but incidents, events, discussions, and locations, and even the quotations are common to both books. The resemblances are more than a sense of *dejavu*....."<sup>1</sup>

As in *The Serpent and the Rope*, we find the scene is once again Paris. Events, too, have been repeated, such as a short-lived adultery — this time with Mireille instead of Lakshmi and a major surgery is performed in London—a cyst is removed from J.'s brain in place of the hero's lung operation. And, of course, we have the same speculative teacher-pupil sort of dialogues between the hero and all other characters with the protagonist always upholding his point of view. Ironically, despite the hero's intellectual superiority, his research work comes to a dead end because the hero's words are,

"I was not interested in going out to prove anything to any one.

I wanted to prove everything to myself."

*The Chessmaster and His Moves* constantly reminds the reader that every happening is a play and the protagonist is merely a chesspiece whose actions are nothing but movements manipulated by a mysterious omnipotent master player. Hence words, images and metaphors connected with game or play

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1. Makarand Paranjape, *The Difficult Pilgrimage :The Chessmaster and His Moves and Its Readers in WORD AS MANTRA* P.124.



are repeated throughout the novel which emphasize the fact that the happenings narrated are not true.

"Nothing ever happened."

The gravity of external incidents is lost in playful "cogitation." Hence Siva's belief in Advaita Vedanta i.e in the non-dualism of the Absolute and the individual makes his adultery with his friend's wife and mother of three children a

"playful drama of the two becoming not-two."

The seriousness of the love between Siva and Jaya is lost when compared to

"the festivity at a doll's marriage".

Even the intellectual marathon between the Brahmin and the Rabbi concludes as an item of sport in a medieval tournament. Siva admits that all his ideas are just

"mathematical equations for a lazy mind to amuse itself."

This mode of presentation seems to have been purposely designed by the author to impress upon the reader that life is indeed nothing but

"a cosmological game"

and nothing actually happens in this make-believe world except the basic physiological functions.

Again, one finds the author trying to justify what is generally considered abnormal in man-woman relationship. In order to achieve this he has built up a whole set of symbols and motifs such as the ancient Egyptian royal custom of brother-sister alliance. There is even a reference to the geological theory of the continental split which took place ages back when the landmass now known as the South India was part of the continent containing Egypt. Hence Egyptians and Dravidians are sort of cousins and there is this custom of cousin-marriage in some communities in South India.

We are told,

"Marriage is marriage that never takes place."

Siva's comments about his relationship with Suzanne or Jaya bring out the glaring absurdity of life when he calls these relationships merely a

"metaphysical interlocking — with each other's postures only,"

comparing this to the streetcours joined in the act of copulation, unable to get themselves free from each other till forcibly separated by some passer-by. Hence Rao's purpose in this appears to be the portrayal of a soul in which the sublime, the erotic and the vulgar have converged to bring about its dissolution. As Makarand Paranjape puts it :

"In *The Chessmaster*, it is not the realization of self that is sought as in the earlier works, but a dissolution of self. -----

Sivaram Sastri represents the power of negative dialectics, the attempt not to achieve something but to vaporize one's self into nothing."<sup>1</sup>

Besides, Rao has tried to dissolve contradictions by making all the differences hinge on the opposition between zero and infinity and letting the reader reflect on the fact that neither zero nor infinity wins.

When considering the use of language in this novel, one finds a sprinkling of spoken French and Sanskrit-based words by the author who displays a tendency to use long sentences and paragraphs. A sentence has, at times, run to thirty lines and a paragraph to pages.

However, the whole design appears like a piece of modern art with its disjointed pattern of narration and meditation. All of these are held together by the

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1. Makarand Paranjape, *The Difficult Pilgrimage :The Chessmaster and His Moves and its Readers in WORD AS MANTRA* p.121.

author's language and style which provides the thematic note to this vast mosaic of voluminous written matter.

In a penetrating essay, *The Writer and The Word*, Rao makes this wonderful observation :

"Triple are the constituents of a book—the word, the author, the reader. The word which says what the author has to indicate, and the reader has to apprehend, .....the word, like every constituted thing, seems to have a birth, a life-span, and a death..... he who says the word enunciates the word, and he who hears it has to have the eternal part awakened in him so that there could be right communication..... The word indeed is eternal. .... The word is but vibrant silence compounded into a momentary act..... Unless the word becomes *mantra* no writer is a writer, and no reader a reader."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, whether it is the short stories or his major novels, Rao attaches great significance to the written word to communicate to the reader various shades of feelings and emotions so that in his creative framework each word pulsates with life and, indeed, becomes a *mantra*.

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1. Raja Rao, *The Meaning of India*, p. 153, 154, 155.

## Conclusion : The Meaning of India That Emerges

Raja Rao is a novelist who uses the novel to explore profound philosophical themes and present his vision of India which, according to him, is not a country, but a perspective. Though his earlier works abound in Indian visuals, topography, mythology, lore and other circumstantial details, one finds later on a growing concentration on abstraction.

In his quest to establish an Indian identity, Rao draws particularly on the wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads and the teachings of Sankara to explore the Indian philosophy and metaphysic which, according to him, set India apart as that supreme civilization which lends meaning to man's quest for the truth about his own existence and his relation with the phenomenal world.

Familiar with both the Indian and Western intellectual preoccupations, Rao upholds in his writings the Vedic world of India as a living world against Western materialism which reduces all life to a meaningless mechanism. As Kathleen Raine puts it,

"Raja Rao was therefore among the first to present *the India of the Imagination* to Western readers as a great civilization grounded in totally other premises than those of the West."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Kathleen Raine, *Raja Rao: A Personal Tribute* in *WORD AS MANTRA*, p.3.

The philosophical quest that runs through his entire work makes it evident that Rao lays great emphasis upon the wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads which shape the Indian philosophy. He enters deeply into the world of Indian metaphysics and unfolds to his reader "that **India** which is not a country but a state of being."<sup>1</sup>

Intellectually and emotionally Rao is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition so that for him literature is a **sadhana** or a kind of spiritual growth. In the great Indian tradition, Rao considers literature a **sadhana** and his fictional work

"is thus founded on the metaphysical and linguistic speculations  
of the Indians."<sup>2</sup>

as stated in his paper by Parthasarathy. He further remarks :

"Rao's ideas of language, especially the empowerment of the word, are formed by the linguistic speculations of the Indians, notably Patanjali (2nd century BCE).... In the Indian tradition, literature (Sahitya) was a way of realizing the Absolute (Brahman) through the mediation of language..... It was this metaphysical bias that distinguished Indian literature from every other literature."<sup>3</sup>

Hence one finds an abundant use of Sanskrit in Rao's fiction. Novels such as **The Serpent and the Rope**, which have a strong metaphysical bias, have Sanskrit interspersed throughout because the philosophical speculations of the ancient Indians were mainly expressed in Sanskrit. The interpretation of Vedantic

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1. Kathleen Raine, *Raja Rao : A Personal Tribute in WORD AS MANTRA*, p.1.
  2. R. Parthasarathy, *The Example of Raja Rao in WORD AS MANTRA*, p.8.
  3. Ibid, p. 8.

philosophy forms an integral part of *The Serpent and the Rope*. Hence we have dialogues of the Upanishadic kind.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* has been presented as a comedy in which the philosophical bias is more pronounced and the image projected is a world which is the play or *lila* of the Absolute.

Therefore, whether it is the quest for the Absolute in *The Serpent and the Rope* or that quest resolved in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Rao makes his fictional output function like the traditional Indian literature which enlightens an individual about the reality of his existence.

Moreover, the mention of the *Guru* in some of Rao's novels is in keeping with traditional Indian literature which highlights the importance of the *Guru* as *Jivanmukta* i.e., a person endowed with the knowledge of Brahman. It is the *Guru* who has the ability to remove the disciple's confusion and illuminate his path so that he moves from darkness to light. It is this idea that is dwelt upon at length in *The Chessmaster and His Moves* where the *Guru* finds mention in the names of such revered ones as Aruni, Uddalaka, Yajnavalkya, Buddha, Atmananda, Krishna, Ramana, Sankara and Gandhi.

In the same novel Rao also spells the four aims of human life which are the essence of Hinduism viz. duty, wealth, desire and liberation. Thus, it is the spirituality of India that Rao has dealt with in his work.

A significant point, however, is the fact that Rao draws upon India's epics and Puranas to build up the structural frame-work of his novels. Thus it is that in *Kanthapura* he has created a *Sthalapurana*. His entire work, according to him, is

"an attempt at Puranic recreation of Indian story telling : that is to say, the story, as story, is conveyed through a thin thread to which are attached (or which passes through) many other stories, fables, and philosophical disquisitions, like a mala (garland)."

Calling himself a Vedantist, he proclaims the superiority of non-dualism over dualism as explained by Sankaracharya. Again, in *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, one finds the author trying to resolve the conflict between the vertical and horizontal world views and between zero and infinity.

In his novels Rao creates serious intellectual dialogue between the classical and the modern in order to prove the superiority of the classical over the modern. He presents an India that is classical and spiritual and, hence, sacred. In three major works, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *Comrade Kirillov* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, Rao projects the central character as an orthodox Hindu and a spokesman for India, more precisely, for "Brahminhood" so that in each of these books India becomes the real character. Rao's hero represents the cerebral strength and practical vagueness of India. This India of Rao's definition is far removed from India today where "Brahminhood" cries out for an identity. Rao's India is far removed from that India which is trying to keep apace with the industrial and technological advancements of the world. His view seems encrusted in a shell where he is complacent about a classical India embedded in tradition and spirituality. Rao appears to have deliberately rooted himself in the past and to the reader of today his views might appear to be historically dated. But, then, for a philosophical novelist like Raja Rao, India's identity even today would remain intact if it remains classical. We have Raman Srinivasan's remarks:

"Raja Rao often challenges younger Indians by asking 'How can you modernize India?' For him India can be India only if it remains classical. A classical civilization survives modernity by digesting it, by becoming post-traditional."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Raman Srinivasan, *Blinding I : Toward a Poetics of Post-Traditional Technology* in *WORD AS MANTRA*, p. 162.

Hence a writer like Rao remains firmly secure in the belief that the wisdom of an ancient classical tradition will not only enable India to survive modernity but also draw the attention of the West which has always turned for solace to the spiritual East.

Taken as a whole, through fables, short stories and novels, Rao presents a vision of the Indian civilization which stands distinguished from the rest of the civilizations by virtue of its unique classical tradition and spirituality which make it the land of the Ultimate Truth and the end of every man's journey to discover that Truth.

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